COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE: STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE SOUTHERN AGRICULTURAL LABOR MOVEMENT, 1923-1940

by

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ELOISE PIERSON MASON. Commonwealth College: Student Activism and the Southern Agricultural Labor Movement, 1923-1940. (Under the direction of JOHN O. FISH.)

Commonwealth College was begun in 1923 by Dr. William Edward Zeuch to provide for higher education in the New Llano communitarian experiment in Louisiana. When tension between the colony and the school became intense, the relationship was severed, and Commonwealth moved to a site outside Mena, Arkansas. Another change paralleled the change in location: Commonwealth evolved into a labor school, an attempt to provide the laborer with the practical and ideological training necessary to develop an improved system of social and economic relationships.

The delta area of Arkansas was dominated by traditional Southern ideas. The one-crop system of agriculture, labor organized into a system of tenancy, and rigid controls on race resulted in a stagnant economic and social system, one far removed from that envisioned by the Commoners. This discrepancy was intensified by the depression which was felt by farmers almost a decade before the rest of the nation.

The New Deal agricultural program was accepted in the Cotton Belt and administered according to traditional Southern ideas. Tenants were little more than a third party in an option contract between the landlord and the government. Inequities in New Deal relief resulted in increased activism among the Commoners and their new director, Lucien Koch, and in the growth of a bi-racial organization

of sharecroppers, Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The Union's initial fear of Commonwealth's radicalism was overcome by the need for organizers and, in spite of this latent hostility, the students and faculty became active in holding mass meetings and organizing locals of STFU.

Commonwealth's activism on behalf of the STFU resulted in several legislative investigations, sedition bills, and threats of violence. As economic situations deteriorated during the Depression, the school moved steadily to the left, and in the process alienated the Union. Commonwealth had from its inception maintained a posture of non-factionalism but had drawn its greatest strength from Socialist members, as had the Union. Even though not officially, the school was increasingly influenced by its Communist factions, and, although it cannot be interpreted as simply another confrontation between Socialism and Communism because of the personal animosity and labor politics involved, the Union had, by 1938, disavowed any connection with the College. Commonwealth, without its allies in organized labor, was almost immediately charged with and found guilty of anarchy. The result of this court action, the loss of the support of organized labor, and the growing conservatism of the community was that the only activist labor school in American history was permanently closed.

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PLANTATION CULTURE AND THE TENANCY SYSTEM

The history of commercial agriculture in the South is divided into distinct parts by the Civil War and the resulting end of slavery. Emancipation gave former slaves freedom and mobility, but little more. Without economic and social security the freedman's destiny was almost pre-determined by the plantation system and Southern culture. The plantation system survived the War and with it the need for a large, unskilled, and docile labor force. Plantation life continued much as it had before the Civil War. Former slaves returned to the plantation to resume farming, the only occupation known or open to them. The economic distress which prevailed at this time forced a wage contract system by which the land poor planters paid their laborers annually. Negroes, landless, without savings, and distrustful of the contract system raised few objections as the system of "sharing" evolved.[1] The share system has been described as "an adjustment man to man, and race to race, that has been received as a social heritage from the past."[2] The post-Civil War plantation system differed little from its predecessor in its emphasis upon the strict supervision and control of its labor force.[3]

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[1]Rupert Vance, Human Factors in Cotton Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 56.

[2]Ibid., 34.

[3]Ibid., 69.

The influence of the plantation system was almost inescapable, possessing according to one observer, "an influence in southern life far greater than its extent. . . . It sets the mode by which the human factors in cotton shall be regulated."[4] The pre-Civil War exploitation of land and labor continued in the post-Civil War period and resulted in increased soil exhaustion, the perpetuation of crude farming methods and machinery, and produced a near peasant class of black and white laborers. Much of the way of life involved in the plantation system and most of its ill-effects were inherent in the one-crop system. The agricultural South was distinguished by low incomes, landless farmers, illiteracy, and ill-health, all of which re-inforced one another to create a civilization whose decadence has been described as "far advanced."[5]

Lack of diversification of commercial crops made the Cotton Belt particularly susceptible to market fluctuations, the weather, and the boll weevil.[6] The single-crop system imposed a special hardship on the landless poor which was accurately described by the title of a fictional work exposing the conditions of farm tenancy, Cabin in the Cotton. Farm laborers were not encouraged to raise their own food,

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[4] Ibid., 79.

[5] Arthur Raper, Preface to Peasantry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 3.

[6] Charles Johnson, Edwin Embree, and W. W. Alexander, The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 35.

however badly it was needed, because every available acre was planted in cotton. Many tenants, deprived of even enough yard for a garden, truly lived in the cotton fields. Tenant farmers without money or home-grown provisions had only two choices. They could do without the food that they needed and become further victimized by poor health or they could buy the food on credit and become further victimized by debt.

The vulnerability of the one-crop system to the weather and the weevil were apparent to the farmer, but an understanding of the depressed prices of the cotton market were not. The farmer's response to lowered prices of the cotton market was to borrow more money, buy more land, and grow more cotton. The result of all this was increased over-production and constantly falling prices. The reasoning expressed in this poem was typical:

> Thar's one thing farmers all must do,
> To keep themselves from goin' tew.
> Bankruptcy and the devil.
>
> More corn, more corn, must plant less ground
> And mustn't eat what's boughten;
> Next year they'll do it, reason's sound,
> And cotton'll fetch 'bout a dollar a pound.
> Tharfore I'll plant all cotton.[7]

This speculative attitude was part of what one student of the South has called the "cotton culture complex," attitudes derived from the economic, geographic, and social factors which surrounded cotton

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[7]Vance, Human Factors, 305.

growing. The attitudes represented an adjustment, however irrational, to the one-crop system.[8]

Indebtedness was a fact of life in the agricultural South. Louis XIV is reported to have made the statement that "credit supports agriculture as the cord supports the hanged."[9] What was true in France in the 17th century was also true in the post-Civil War South when the plantation system continued to survive on credit and the exploitation of labor. Even the wealthy planter in the South was dangerously dependent upon credit since his wealth was in the form of land rather than money. Planters were rarely distressed about this since landowning in the South had always been the basis of prestige.[10] As dependence upon credit increased, vulnerability to lowered cotton prices or a bad crop due to weather or the boll weevil made the farmer more likely to lose his land. The economic situation, which was deteriorating during the 1920's, dropped to a crisis level in 1929 when the early signs of depression hit the urban areas of the United States. The farmer's debtor status made him especially subject to economic distress and banker's attempts to avoid failure through foreclosures. The planter could often use his social or political status to forestall bankruptcy but the small farmer, always on the brink of bankruptcy, had neither. Almost any crisis, no matter how small, could cause him

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[8] Ibid., 305-07.

[9] Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 25.

[10] Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 71.

to lose his land. The net effect of all this was that land became concentrated in fewer hands and those who lost their land tended to become tenants.[11]

The institution to which the plantation system owed its longevity and which significantly contributed to the stagnation of the economy of the South was tenancy. Charles Johnson, a contemporary student of the share system, noted that "the civilized nations of the world have long since faced the problem of tenancy and systematically abolished it. . . . In the United States nothing of a serious nature has been done to modify an admittedly wretched agrarian system."[12] Although fully acquainted with the effects of tenancy, even Johnson did not realize how backward the United States was in this respect. The United States and the South had failed to act because the wretchedness of the system had never been admitted. In 1943, Yale published a prize-winning essay dealing with plantation life in Arkansas. The author, Donald Crichton Alexander, reported that the "poverty of the South is not due to the tenant system."[13] Alexander pointed out that the system offered distinct advantages to the tenant since he was furnished "the necessities of life and the requirements of production . . . all with no investment and no risk."[14] He continued: "tenancy

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[11] Ibid., 6.

[12] Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 69.

[13] Donald Crichton Alexander, The Arkansas Plantation, 1920-1942 (New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1943), 62.

[14] Ibid., 66.

in itself is neither good nor bad . . . the percentage of tenancy in itself does not constitute a problem." Alexander generously concluded, however, that "some of the features of the system are undesirable,"[15] that there were certain instances where tenants were exploited by the credit system or an unfair planter but that the fault was with individual planters and tenants, not with the system of tenancy.

Johnson may not have realized to what extent attitudes like those of Alexander's permeated the South, but he clearly understood the reason for the Southerner's lack of perception when he wrote that "any movement for tenancy reform is immediately confused with the race issue."[16] Landownership in the South had always been a white institution, with no more than one acre in twenty being owned by Negroes in the years immediately preceding the Depression.[17] Tenancy had been imposed on both races but the level of tenancy was usually determined by race. Johnson wrote that "Negro migration to the North has resulted in native whites of the Black Belt being the most effected by the problems of cotton tenancy"[18] and this was certainly true until the Depression reversed the tide of the migration and the Negro took the place of the white in the lowest economic level of the tenants. This was sometimes also true in a relative sense when the white tenant

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[15] Ibid., 64.

[16] Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 10.

[17] Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 263.

[18] Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 5.

may have been assuming this lower status for the first time, while the Negro was more likely to have been accustomed to this position.

The share system as it developed was composed of three levels of tenancy: cash or standing renters, share renters, and sharecroppers.[19] Each level was distinguished from the others by the relative amount furnished by the landowner and the tenant. The highest status and the level most profitable to the tenant was cash renting, traditionally reserved for whites. Cash renters signed or verbally agreed to a contract which stipulated that the tenant furnish labor, stock and the necessary feed, and whatever tools, seeds, and fertilizers were needed. The landlord furnished land, the tenant's house, and wood for fuel and, in return, received a fixed amount of money or of cotton. The tenant received everything else. Share renting, the middle level of tenancy, involved both races. Share renters furnished labor, stock and feed, tools, seed, and either three-quarters or two-thirds of the fertilizer in exchange for either three-quarters or two-thirds of the cotton crop. The landlord furnished land, housing, fuel, and either one-fourth or one-third of the fertilizer and received the remaining portion of cotton. The lowest level of tenancy was reserved almost entirely for blacks. Landlords agreed to provide land, housing, fuel, tools, stock and feed, seed and one-half of the fertilizer. The tenant contributed only his labor and one-half of the fertilizer. At the

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[19]Vance, Human Factors, 67.

end of the season the landlord and tenant each received one-half of the crop.[20]

Each year after crops were harvested and sold the landlord and tenant would clear the accounts according to the stipulations of the contract. At this time a new contract was agreed to, or if he could clear his account and felt that he could improve his position, the tenant was free to move. This system seems to offer protection to both the tenant and the planter, since the way that the crop was to be shared was determined prior to the harvest. What looked good on paper rarely operated to the equal benefit of the two parties since they were not bargaining from equal positions of strength. Arthur Raper observed that "the established relation between the landlord and the tenant has made a puny dictator of the one and a fatalistic plodder of the other."[21]

As he reviewed the theory of tenancy, Charles Johnson concluded that land renting was not inherently evil, but that the South's tenancy system was "dangerous because it [was] advantageous to the owner to encourage the most dependent form of sharecropping as a source of the largest profits."[22] Consequently, the contract negotiated between the landlord and the tenant was a less than true picture of the tenancy system as it was applied in the United States. The strict control of labor was maintained by the social customs of the South, with

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[20]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 146-47.

[21]Ibid., 173.

[22]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 8.

regard to both race and class, and by the credit or "furnish" system. In many cases tenant farmers fell to their low status due to lack of savings or capital. Each level of tenancy required that the tenant supply something that required a cash outlay, even if only one-third of the fertilizer. More often than not, in order for these purchases to be made, planters had to make cash advances to the tenants. As the depression made itself felt, cash advances were replaced by script for commissaries and credit at the general store.[23] In either case, books were kept for the illiterate tenant by the landlord, who also handled the sale of the cotton crop.[24] The tenant's cash income during the 1930's averaged between $100 and $300, but debts to the landlord for the furnish or credit often amounted to as much or more than the cash owed the tenant. Usually this was not because the purchases equalled or exceeded the tenant's share of the harvest, but because the interest charged on advances or credit was as high as 35 percent or 40 percent and because the prices in the commissary might be appreciably higher than those elsewhere.[25] Since no other source of credit was available to the tenant without the recommendation and approval of the landlord, the tenant became more and more indebted to the landlord and his chances of becoming a tenant of a lower status constantly increased. In this way tenancy in Arkansas increased from 30.9 percent in 1880 to

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[23]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 178.

[24]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 8.

[25]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 40.

56.7 percent in 1925.[26] By 1935, 60 percent of those engaged in the production of cotton were tenants, with the figures for Arkansas usually rising above the national average.[27] Not only were there more landless farmers in the Black Belt than elsewhere, but there was also a greater percentage of landless farmers who fell into the sharecropper category, the lowest level of tenancy.[28]

The increase in the percentage of tenancy, especially at the lowest level, was both cause and rationalization for comparing the tenant to his pre-Civil War counterpart, the slave. The tenant was like a child; he worked only when he was in danger of starving; he expected "nothing but a living."[29] Overseers, deemed necessary for tenants, were often called "pistol-totin' deputies." In Arthur Raper's opinion "the hired white overseer is the direct descendant of the slave driver."[30] According to the planters, tenants acted like slaves and should be treated accordingly. Johnson identified this tendency when he wrote that "Serious statements about the happiness of the tenant in his dependent role are taking the place of earlier stories of the contentment of the slaves."[31] For the Negro tenant especially, the church

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[26]Vance, Human Factors, 66.

[27]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 6.

[28]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 143.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., 107-08.

[31]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 14-15.

assumed the same role that it did for the slave.[32] White churches ignored the situation of the tenant and Negro churches accepted it as another manifestation of the racial issue. The tenant was thus described in the same terms as the slave. He was either "shiftless" or "uppity." He was either needlessly assuming a dependent status or was ungrateful for all that was done for him. If the tenant acquiesced to being treated as a slave and accepted a dependent position it only served as further justification for more subjugation. If the tenant did not acquiesce it was always possible to insure his independence by keeping him in debt.[33]

Tenants were accused of being lazy and of having little ambition. It was unfortunately true that many tenants expected only a subsistence living[34] but, in part, their lack of incentive was due to the fact that they correctly perceived their situation as one which they had no power to correct. Another factor which stifled incentive was lack of legal protection.[35] The status of the tenant was firmly limited by social custom and the privileged position of the planter was protected by law. The tenant's pessimism must also be linked to lack of physical well-being. They were found, according to Charles Johnson, to be the most poorly fed of any large group in the 1930's,[36] due to the

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[32]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 371-72.

[33]Ibid., 172.

[34]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 13.

[35]Ibid., 20.

[36]Ibid., 16.

loyalty of the planter to the cash crop. Thus the tenant was forced into a state of submission, accepted this status, and then was forced into an even more subordinate position because he had accepted the first. Therefore, Arthur Raper identified a "fatalism which accompanies [the tenant's] low plane of living [and] does to their minds what inadequate food, malaria, and hookworm do to their bodies."[37]

Johnson described the status and hopelessness of the tenant in this way:

> The mobility of the tenant, his dependence, his lack of ambition, shiftlessness, his ignorance, his poverty, the lethargy of his pellagra-ridden body, provide a ready excuse for keeping him under a stern paternalistic control. There is not a single trait, which, where true, does not owe its source and continuance to the imposed status itself.[38]

Recent studies of poverty have identified the cycle of poverty at which Johnson hinted and have stressed its self-reinforcing nature.[39] Students of the problems now realize that the poor are unable to raise their own status because they are unhealthy, uneducated, and unenthusiastic about their future. Basic changes in their situation must be made before the poor can help themselves.

Unfortunately, planters of the period were not this perceptive. Popular thought more nearly approximated the "bootstrap" theory.

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[37]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 405.

[38]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 21-22.

[39]Excellent work in this field has been done by John Kenneth Galbraith in The Affluent Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), and by Michael Harrington in The Other America (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

Tenants were poor because they were lazy. If they would work hard and develop habits of thrift, they could lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. This is all too apparent in the prize-winning writings of Donald Alexander: "While much of what passes for laziness in the South is hookworm and pellagra, it is undeniable that the average cropper is inherently shiftless."[40] Alexander attempts to prove the sharecroppers' dependence with this example: On a large plantation in Arkansas there were already two tenants who were named John Henderson. When a new tenant showed up the overseer asked, "What's your name?" The tenant replied, "John Henderson, suh." The overseer said, "Too damn many John Hendersons around this place already; from now on your name is John Henry Alexander." The new name was accepted by the tenant, and assumed to prove his willingness to be subjugated.[41] Alexander judges the basic controls of the tenant system from the same point of view. The subjugation of the tenant by the credit system he says was wrong, "but actual cases of such treatment are so few as to become notorious whenever they occur." Exploitation was not common, according to Alexander, because "the spirit of paternalism is not dead in the South" and "because the tenants were not slow to find out that they were being cheated."[42] In this way

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[40] Alexander, Arkansas Plantation, 74.

[41] Ibid., 74n.

[42] Ibid., 66.

the planter deceived himself about the necessity of controls and their benefits to tenants.

The one-crop plantation system, the depressed prices of agricultural commodities, increasing indebtedness, and the possibility of a contracting job market due to increased mechanization held little hope for the tenant farmer of the 1930's. Admission of his dismal prospects included the realization that external help was not forthcoming. The planters, business and professional men, and the church leaders consolidated the economic and social power of the agricultural South in an effort to maintain rather than to reform tenancy. Unwilling to loosen the social and economic controls over the tenants for racial reasons, leaders in the South were unable to see that their section could not prosper with such a large group of dependents. Tenants were a defeated people, unable to contribute to an economy and a social order which were becoming increasingly stagnant. Arthur Raper correctly predicted that "the South can hope to be nothing but the Orient of this nation so long as wages and working conditions are determined by the competition of plantation workers accustomed to practically no money and a minimum diet. The imminence of a mechanized cotton picker only complicates the picture."[43] When it began to look as if the situation could not deteriorate further, the South, along with the rest of the nation, was struck by the worst depression in our history.

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[43]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 6.

BENEFITS FOR OWNERS; RELIEF FOR TENANTS[1]

After an investigation of agricultural reconstruction in the South, Dr. William Amberson, a University of Tennessee physiologist well-known for his Socialist leanings, reported that the "accentuated misery of the depression [had brought] a rediscovery of the Southern agrarian problem."[2] Indeed the depression that hit the United States in the early 1930's brought nothing new to the farmer, only more of the tight money, depressed prices of farm commodities, and foreclosures that he had experienced for the past ten years. Even as the economic situation grew progressively worse, President Hoover remained true to his conviction that relief was not the responsibility of the federal government. Hoover's attempts to help banking and industrial giants had little effect on the farmer except to show by comparison that nothing was being done for the agrarian community. The first organized attempt of the farmer to express his discontent was the Farm Holiday Association, an organization which attempted to use the strike to bring about a recognition of the situation and to create a scarcity which would increase farm prices. The scattered strikes

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[1] Charles Johnson, Edwin Embree, and W. W. Alexander, The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 50.

[2] William Amberson, "Agricultural Reconstruction In The South," Typed copy found at Memphis State University, Mississippi Valley Collection, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers. (Hereinafter cited as MVC-STFU.)

which occurred in the midwestern states in 1931 and 1932 received national recognition, but their effect was more to brand the farmer a radical than to make him the object of the nation's sympathy.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President the farm protest had quieted, but the situation remained desperate. The age-old problems of the farmer were still very real: credit, depressed prices of farm commodities, and a dependent class of laborers. Roosevelt's New Deal re-organized credit and increased prices appreciably in the next few years, but "Roosevelt's well-intentioned attempts to reconcile basic differences between have's and have-not's [resulted] only in defining the issues and precipitating actual conflict."[3]

Early New Deal programs were aimed at providing farmers credit to avoid mortage foreclosures. Although the intent of the Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Land Bank was to help those at every economic level, large landowners, even though financially embarassed, still retained their political and social power, and therefore were judged most worthy of loans. At least part of the problem was also due to lack of administrative help which made it easier to lend money in large amounts to large landowners because it was easier than processing many loans to small farmers.[4] This relative advantage further handicapped owners of small farms and led to further centralization of the ownership of land.

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[3][attributed to William Amberson by editor], "Terror in Arkansas," The Nation, CXL (February 13, 1935), 174.

[4]Arthur Raper, Preface to Peasantry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 236.

New Dealers, however, realized that credit was only a part of the problem, a symptom of the economic difficulties created by oversupply of farm commodities. To remedy this basic problem they proposed the Agricultural Adjustment Act, an attempt to establish a balance between the production and consumption of agricultural commodities.[5] The farmers' purchasing power was to be maintained at that of a base period, 1909 to 1914, and the consumers' interest protected by not allowing the farmers' share of the national income to rise above this base period. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace was given power to reduce acreage by voluntary agreement with individual farmers, to make benefit and rental payments, and to enter into marketing agreements with processors. A processing tax, equal to the difference between current farm prices and the parity price, would pay for the expenses of the program. The AAA temporarily helped the plantation economy but hurt the tenant. Alexander's statement that "At the end of 1935 the Southern farmer was fairly prosperous and contented" betrays his background and his narrow definition of "the Southern farmer." While the majority of large landowners, who might have been bankrupt before the fall of 1934, had been given another chance by the New Deal, the program had some other effect on the

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[5]Donald Crichton Alexander, The Arkansas Plantation, 1920-1942 (New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1943), 34.

tenant.[6] Johnson felt that "the government under AAA [had] assumed many of the risks of the landowners and thrown them on the tenants."[7] The risk of over-production, for example, was met by the quota system which paid the landlord for retiring lands. Although not intended by the AAA, this was sometimes responsible for the displacement of tenants. For this reason it was often called the "landlords' code" by tenant farmers who saw that federal funds were being spent "in conformity with the philosophy and practices of the plantation rooted in slavery days."[8] Any disorganization of the tenancy system caused by the program tended to weaken the relative position of the tenant and was quickly exploited by the planter. Any part of the code which did not meet with the approval of the landlord could be corrected in the administration of it.

Under these conditions it would seem that the AAA should have enjoyed the full cooperation of the planter, but this was not the case. By the time that the first cotton contracts were negotiated, cotton had been planted and indications pointed to another bumper crop. AAA officials saw no way to correct the situation except a plow-up campaign, an admittedly drastic and unorthodox measure to be undertaken during a depression. This did little to win the support of those already

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[6] See for instance Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 233, and Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 57.

[7] Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 50.

[8] Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 6.

wary of AAA and, perhaps worse, it was not effective in controlling the cotton surplus. Farmers simply plowed-up one-fourth of their crops and, with the help of more intensive farming and unusually good weather, produced more than they had the previous year.

When acreage reduction proved ineffective the Bankhead Cotton Control Act was passed. Farmers were restricted in the amount of cotton that they could market rather than how many acres could be planted. Tags were provided for each bale of cotton that could be marketed tax-free according to allotments based on previous years' harvests.

The New Deal agricultural program reflected the Roosevelt philosophy of local control.[9] This emphasis on decentralization meant that what was conceived as a national program which would bring equitable relief to all sectors of the community was administered by and for the groups of people represented on local committees made up of ministers, lawyers, newspaper editors, local businessmen, and planters. Arrangements for plow-up campaigns, the negotiation of cotton contracts, and the distribution of marketing tags for Bankhead allotments were handled by planters for themselves and their tenants. Planters who had such freedom often withheld federal payments to

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[9]For a more detailed examination of Roosevelt's philosophy of decentralization see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 38, and Broadus Mitchell, Depression Decade: From New Era through New Deal, 1929-1941 (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), 191.

tenants on the grounds that the landlord had arranged the plow-up and therefore should keep the money.[10] Confiscation of AAA payments were interpreted as "only a natural expression of a social-economic situation three generations in the making."[11] Efforts to change this situation sometimes came down to the issue of property rights versus human rights. The right of creditors to demand back payment, plus the debtor status of most tenants, led to the confiscation of some benefits. These practices were so prevalent and so unchallenged that they soon became crystallized into law: When a planter was sued to recover AAA relief benefits for a laborer, the sharecropper was declared to be only a third part to the contract, "merely a factor about which the two principles had made an agreement."[12]

Land taken out of cultivation was to have been freely available to the tenant for gardening and was more often rented to tenants for this purpose, but this and other practices seem mild in light of the displacement of tenants. The situation was serious enough to prompt the statement that "if crisis can be said to exist in a region where crises are chronic, the wholesale dispossession of tenants can be qualified as such."[13] Displacement was an unforeseen result of AAA. The cotton contracts which limited acreage also limited the number of tenants needed. Landlords who felt no responsibility to their tenants

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[10]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 245.

[11]J. M. MacLachlan and E. W. S. MachLan, "Don't Rescue Tenancy: Abolish It," The New Republic, LXXIX (June 13, 1934), 117.

[12]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 72.

[13]Ibid., 62.

often reduced the number of tenants and used the cheaper source of labor supplied by wage hands.[14]

The dispossessed tenant, the one most in need of relief, was the one least likely to be helped. The tenant who lost his land due to acreage reduction or the whim of a planter also lost his home and his source of credit. When this occurred the tenant had little choice but to turn to federal relief, but direct and work relief were usually reserved for those who were deemed worthy by their landlords. Those who had no landlord had little hope of relief.[15] Tenants who acquiesced to the landlord and the system could expect relief if they experienced especially hard times or were a financial burden to their landlords during the off season.[16] The power of the landlord to determine the recipients of relief explains the higher proportion of whites who received relief. Planters reflected traditional Southern prejudices when they assumed that Negroes could live on less.[17] Ironically, even relief programs were administered for the benefit of the landlord. Relief to the tenant was inadequate, in part, because planters realized that adequate relief would be inimical to their interests,

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[14]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 153. T. J. Woofter and Ellen Winston would place some qualifications on the effects of the federal program. They feel that much of the displacement which has been attributed to AAA was influenced by early depression foreclosures, voluntary acreage reduction, and increasing mechanization. T. J. Woofter and Ellen Winston, Seven Lean Years (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 22.

[15]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 259.

[16]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 58.

[17]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 258.

that it would "offer more to many of the landless farmers than they had been receiving from their employment."[18]

Perhaps the most controversial measure of the New Deal agricultural program and certainly the least-well received was an attempt to re-locate starving and landless farmers on government subsistence homesteads where they would be provided with land, shelter, the essential tools of farming, and credit. Class prejudices, reinforced by racial prejudices, kept local power structures from giving their support. Alexander reported that homesteads "aroused the ire of landlords" because Negroes involved were called "Mister" and told that they, as equals of whites, should insist on their right to vote.[19] The Delta Chamber of Commerce in Arkansas issued a statement regarding homesteads which Dr. Amberson termed a redefinition of democracy:

> The program of financial assistance should be carefully drawn with a view to help the ambitious, thrifty, industrious individual to help himself, rather than a general bestowal of gratuities on persons, who, although needy and deserving of help, lack the above-mentioned qualities so necessary if they are to manage and operate their own farms.
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> The setting up of government owned and operated farms for such workers is un-sound and un-American, and is peonage of the worst sort. It puts government into the private business of farming. . . . It cannot be tolerated in a democratic government.[20]

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[18] Ibid., 272.

[19] Alexander, Arkansas Plantation, 74-75.

[20] MacLachlan and MacLachlan, "Don't Rescue Tenancy," 118.

The criticisms of homesteads came from all directions. Those sympathetic with tenants and knowledgeable about their situation suggested weaknesses which could not so easily be discounted. Many of their complaints centered around the idea that the homesteads, by their very nature, would provide only a subsistence living for the tenant.[21] In the words of Dr. Amberson, "the big planter across the road was a stubborn fact" that made competition impossible.[22] Amberson not only believed that the program was so narrow in scope that it would not re-establish more than five percent of the landless farmers, but he also doubted the validity of a program which would be administered "by those responsible for perpetuating the present system."[23] Rexford Tugwell, New Deal economist, resisted the homesteads mainly for social reasons. He felt that homesteads would have been anachronisms even in the New Deal days, and, therefore, would be doomed by a hostile environment and uncooperative participants.[24] Finally, homesteads were also opposed because they were half-way measures that might eliminate the possibility of more meaningful programs. One critic found a comparable situation in an earlier time: "In 1865 there was much talk of 40 acres and a mule for

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[21] Ibid.

[22] William Amberson, "Forty Acres and a Mule," The Nation, CXLVI (March 6, 1937), 265.

[23] Amberson, "Agricultural Reconstruction in the South," STFU-MVC.

[24] Schlesinger, The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal, 370.

freedmen. No one meant it then. Few mean it now. Even fewer realize its inadequacy."[25] Not surprisingly, most homesteads were liquidated with the beginning of the Farm Security Administration in 1937. The effect of this on the tenant was nominal. Homesteads had never been numerous enough to challenge the power of the landlord in his tenant relations.

With the exception of homestead projects, the New Deal agricultural program was generally accepted by the leaders of the Cotton Belt. Cotton prices rose, improving and stabilizing the planter's economic situation without challenging his hold on the tenant, a major factor in his dominance of the Cotton Belt. Like the planters, bankers, cotton factors, and lawyers directly benefitted from the partisan administration of AAA.[26] Others who had a stake in the status quo benefitted indirectly. After AAA, merchants found that their business increased and old debts were easy to collect.[27] These people were understandably favorable to the federal programs. The small farmer, however, was not helped or hurt directly. He only benefitted from the New Deal programs because the price of cotton rose and he was only hurt by them because his capacity to compete with the larger farmer was impaired. The small farmer, therefore, was usually indifferent to the AAA. The tenant, who was cheated out

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[25]Amberson, "Forty Acres and a Mule," 264.

[26]Raper, Preface to Peasantry, 249.

[27]Ibid., 269.

of AAA payments or replaced by wage hands had a negative reaction to AAA, but his dependence on the landlord often forced him to maintain a pose of indifference.[28]

Without representation on administrative committees, the cause of the tenant farmer was easily discounted at the state and local level, but even in the early stages of the program, high level federal planners were aware that the administration of AAA was causing unforeseen hardships for some tenants. The administrators of the agency reacted to this revelation in accordance with their individual understanding of the purpose of AAA. Conservative men with backgrounds in agriculture pictured AAA as a relief measure, an attempt to raise the prices of farm commodities. A second group, essentially urban and liberal, was prone to a broader interpretation: AAA was to be a vehicle for reform, including not only measures for immediate relief but also basic changes in the economy of the South. The conservatives saw changes in the basic economic and labor system in the Cotton Belt as being outside their area of concern, while the liberals considered alternatives to the system as being basic to any effective program. Reports of wholesale evictions of tenants prompted the formation of several committees which resulted in investigations of the alleged violations of individual rights for the economic benefits of the planters. Some local investigations confirmed the conservative opinion that the problem had been unnecessarily magnified; others

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[28] Ibid., 249.

confirmed the worst fears of the liberals. In an effort to reconcile the two extremes, Mrs. Mary Conner Meyers, an AAA investigator who was judged by both factions to be competent and impartial, was commissioned to investigate the landlord-tenant relationship. Although her final report had disappeared from AAA files before it was ever made public, preliminary reports revealed a situation as bad as any previously disclosed.[29] Rather than uniting in this knowledge and acting on it, the breach between the liberals, mostly in the legal section of AAA, and the conservatives of the cotton section became permanent. The ensuing battle centered upon the attempt to find the correct interpretation of the cotton contract, especially section 7a which dealt with landlord-tenant relationships, and the number of tenants a landlord must retain in his employ. Chester Davis, head administrative officer of AAA, and Cully Cobb, head of the cotton section, confronted the Secretary of Agriculture with an ultimatum: the liberals must go. Wallace accepted this fate for the men "who had striven against all odds" to carry out his own policies because he was convinced that any other decision would cause AAA to lose support of the landlord.[30] Wallace prevailed upon Davis to reduce the number of men who must leave and to demote rather than

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[29]William Amberson to Clay East, February 21, 1935, STFU-MVC; Amberson, "Terror in Arkansas," 174.

[30]Johnson, Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 61, and Raymond Gram Swing, "The Purge at the AAA," The Nation, CXL (February 20, 1935), 216.

to fire many of them, but he sat by while the purge was carried out. Jerome Frank, head of the legal section, and Gardner Jackson, aide to the head of the Consumers Council, were among those fired. Rexford Tugwell refused to remain with Wallace as Undersecretary of Agriculture.[31] The conservatives refusal to publish the Meyer report confirmed the fears of those sympathetic with the liberals.[32] The first important manifestation of the reorganization was a wire sent by Wallace to the Memphis Chamber of Commerce which ended the controversy regarding the interpretation of the cotton contract to the full satisfaction of the conservatives. It disavowed any responsibility on the part of the landlord to retain the same tenants or the same number of tenants. The telegram has been dubbed an "epitaph to liberalism," marking "the end of an era, the defeat of the social outlook in agricultural policy." It could not have been otherwise without the support of Wallace or Roosevelt.[33]

Even before it was evident that the AAA liberals would not be successful in their bid for agricultural reform, the tenants of the Arkansas delta had begun a protest of their own. Investigations of the tenancy problem in the area had not been limited to those sponsored

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[31]Swing, "Purge," 217, and H. L. Mitchell and J. R. Butler, "The Cropper Learns His Fate," The Nation, CXLI (September 18, 1935), 328.

[32]H. L. Mitchell and Howard Kester, "Sharecropper Misery and Hope," The Nation, CXLII (February 12, 1936), 184.

[33]Donald Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 59.

by the government. Norman Thomas, well-known leader of the Socialist Party of America, had financed an investigation by Dr. Amberson. Following the investigation, Thomas visited northeastern Arkansas and spoke there with local Socialists, H. L. Mitchell and Clay East. Out of these conversations came the idea of an agricultural union, a labor organization made up of sharecroppers. The history of agricultural unions offered little hope for success and, while the idea was readily accepted, organization waited on answers to some of the many problems. Leaders were hard to find, experienced ones almost non-existent. Questions regarding the goals and methods of a sharecropper union had to be answered, but there was no past experience with which the organizers could relate.

Before all of these questions were satisfactorily answered the union was begun almost by accident. A group of black and white tenant farmers from Norcross Plantation in northeastern Arkansas met to discuss ways that they could fight evictions and unfair administration of relief programs. Some violent means were suggested but when the idea of a union was brought up by East and Mitchell, it was quickly accepted.[34] The question of an integrated union was immediately raised. Perhaps this small beginning was a propitious one. These tenant farmers knew each other personally, worked together every day, and realized that their problems knew no color

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[34]Amberson to East, February 21, 1935, STFU-MVC.

line. When it was suggested that segregated locals would be vulnerable to the "divide and conquer" tactics of the planter, the group, some formerly members of the Ku Klux Klan, agreed that the union would be bi-racial.[35]

While other locals of the union were being organized on nearby plantations the union acquired a name, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and a constitution. The aims of the Union were more equitable distribution of federal subsidy funds between the tenant and the landlord, higher wages for laborers, and redistribution of lands.[36] Just how all this might be accomplished was not immediately evident, but the obvious first step was widespread unionization. When efforts at organizing locals moved from plantation to towns and became more visible, the inevitable reaction occurred.[37] Threats to black churches and schools, relief discrimination, evictions, yellow-dog contracts, arrests, and boycotts of the businesses of Union leaders were employed to weaken the Union.[38] The Union, always in need of leaders, found it almost impossible to continue when some of their organizers had been frightened away and others had been jailed.[39] As a last resort,

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[35]An untitled document listing members, their race, and former Ku Klux Klan affiliations, STFU-MVC.

[36]The Fortnightly (Commonwealth College Newspaper, Mena, Arkansas) February 1, 1934.

[37]Amberson to Donald Henderson, December 22, 1934.

[38]Lucien Koch, "The War in Arkansas," The New Republic, LXXXII (March 27, 1935), 183, and Mitchell to Amberson, September 13, 1934, STFU-MVC.

[39]Amberson to East, February 21, 1935, STFU-MVC.

Mitchell now turned to Commonwealth College, a source of support that he had consistently ignored because of its turbulent relations with outsiders and its admitted radicalism. The labor school, an outgrowth of a communitarian experiment, had repeatedly shown interest in the growth of the Union. When traditional sources of support failed, Mitchell, with some reservations, wired Commonwealth that "Things are breaking up fast. The Union is holding up in spite of terror of landlords. We need help to control the situation."[40]

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[40]Untitled clipping, New Leader, Commonwealth College Papers.

A WILL TO EMANCIPATION[1]

Industrialization and urbanization in post-Civil War America was accompanied by such materialism, social dislocation, and economic chaos that many Americans began to doubt the value of a system whose by-products were feelings of anxiety and helplessness. One manifestation of this was the wave of communitarian experiments which made up a part of the reform movement of the early 1900's. One of the groups, made up of people who hoped to find an improved economic and political system which could be implemented on a small scale, founded the Llano community in the Antelope Valley of southern California in May, 1914. Led by Job Harriman, a utopian socialist who had been the running mate of Eugene Debs in 1900, the group searched during 1912 and 1913 for a site which could support both industry and agriculture, one which was close to the centers of commerce but which also afforded a closeness to nature. An extinct temperance colony on the Rio del Llano seemed to fill all of these requirements. When the colony began it was financed by the five member families who had each purchased an equal amount of stock in the venture. To implement the Marxian ideology of equality in ownership, wages, and social opportunities, a general assembly was

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[1]F. M. Goodhue, typed manuscript of random reminiscences, titled "Notes," 142, Commonwealth College Papers, (Hereinafter cited as Goodhue, "Notes," CCP.)

formed which included all of the adult members of the colony. Rules for buying stock were not always enforced and the resulting financial problems caused shortages in food, housing, and sanitation facilities, but despite all of these the population of the colony had increased to 300 during the first year of operation. At this time the Llano colony purchased a socialist magazine, the Western Comrade, and established a school system for kindergarten through high school which was promptly dubbed the "Kid Kolony."

As the colony grew and the size of the general assembly became unwieldy, a Commission of Five was created to write a constitution for the colony. When a power struggle developed between the assembly, board of directors, and the Commission which threatened to permanently divide the community, Job Harriman assumed the responsibility of leadership and by 1917 was officially appointed general manager, an event which helped to consolidate the anti-Harriman forces. The infighting, which keyed on the financial problems of the community, only led to bitterness and a general decline in the morale of the community.

By 1917, Llano had 800 colonists and shortages in everything. The community had neglected either to restrict the number of members or to make adequate plans for a growing membership. The most immediate need was for water, but a survey of a prospective dam site revealed a fault line which would make the dam impossible. Unable to deal with the inadequacies of the California location, about 200 colonists,

among them Job Harriman, moved to an abandoned lumber town in Louisiana. The move was expensive, but almost incidental compared to the colonists agreement to purchase the town and the surrounding 16,000 acres for $125,000. The original Llano community in California eventually collapsed due to internal power struggles and loss of members when war-time jobs became plentiful. The community in Louisiana, which was named New Llano, fared only a little better. The inevitable problems were complicated by administrative ones. Job Harriman retained his position as general manager but was often away from the colony for extended periods of time. The second in command, while Harriman mysteriously disappeared and returned, was Ernest Wooster, who eventually succeeded in alienating the few colonists who remained and together they struggled with each other and with their financial responsibilities until Harriman returned. Harriman again took over the leadership of the group[2] but some newly acquired members were more responsible than he for the survival of New Llano. Wilbur Clarke Benton took over the industrial management of the colony and F. M. Goodhue became administrator of the school which was established by another newcomer, Dr. William Edward Zeuch, a graduate of Lenox College, Clark University, and the University of Wisconsin, who resigned his teaching position at the University of Illinois in 1923 to establish a college at New Llano. Another addition to the colony who

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[2]William Henry Cobb, "Commonwealth College: A History" (unpublished masters thesis, University of Arkansas, 1963), 1-24.

was to greatly alter its course, was Kate O'Hare, who became interested in the colony at about the same time as Zeuch. She and her husband were publishing the American Vanguard at this time and Zeuch was familiar with the magazine. Mrs. O'Hare, well-known to Socialists because of her imprisonment for "subversive" lectures regarding the entry of the United States into World War I, had corresponded with Zeuch at the University of Illinois and at New Llano.[3] The O'Hare's moved to the colony and continued publication of the Vanguard. Its circulation at one time approached 20,000 and it proved to be an extremely successful promotional tool for the colony.

Zeuch and Mrs. O'Hare also began to alter the plans for a college to include a self-sustaining labor school which would be affiliated with the colony. The directors and colonists agreed to provide land for the venture and Dr. Zeuch and Mrs. O'Hare had soon infected the entire colony with a new enthusiasm. Zeuch, more than anyone else, was responsible for the development of a school which was unique in the history of education in the United States. Under his leadership the school evolved in two directions. Traditional academic pursuits were not shunted, but were supplemented with farming and manufacturing activities so that the school would be self-sufficient and tuition would not keep anyone from participating in the school's academic endeavors. Zeuch's idealism and devotion made the school less vulnerable to internal strife and forestalled much of the backbiting between

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[3]Fortnightly (Commonwealth College, Mena, Arkansas), March 1, 1927, CCP.

the school and the colony. When Zeuch's power had increased and his devotion to the school became almost tedious, the students began to chafe under his dictatorial involvement in everyday affairs, but in the beginning the school flourished under his direction.[4]

Dr. Zeuch, Mrs. O'Hare and A. J. McDonald, representative of the colony, formed the Commonwealth College Association, with Zeuch as director.[5] The college planned a three year curriculum which Zeuch called "power economics" was to "train leaders to bring about equality in economic, social, and political opportunities for the laboring masses."[6] The socialistic flavor of the curriculum was especially appealing and the school opened on September 30, 1923, with about forty students.[7] Dr. Zeuch's opening day speech reveals his hopes for the labor school:

> Here any worker may acquire education by earning while he is here, lack of money barring no one. Commonwealth has no axe to grind. It is experimental and in a laboratory way trying to work out a better system of economic and social relationships. The faculty aims to be patient and kind; never will it act arbitrarily when forced to expell a disobedient student. Every student at Commonwealth must prove himself or herself worthy of an education.[8]

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[4]Goodhue, "Notes," 112, CCP.

[5]Ibid., 5.

[6]Ibid., 39.

[7]Ibid., 40.

[8]Ibid., 42.

The financial troubles which plagued the colony soon caused friction between the college and the New Llano community.[9] As the Vanguard increased its circulation and the colonists realized what an effective publicity agent it could be, the colony, which financially supported the magazine, and the school, to which Mrs. O'Hare acknowledged her first allegiance, began to disagree over the amount of space allotted to each in the various issues. By the spring of 1924, the Vanguard had entered the quarrel in its own behalf and shortly thereafter the directors of the colony ordered the Vanguard to cease publication. The school and the colony divided into defenders and opponents of the O'Hares.

Previously disagreements between the school and the colony had centered on some minor aspect of the student's behavior which had offended members of the colony or brought comment from outsiders. The disagreement over the financing of the Vanguard was the first major one between the school and the colony. No sooner had it been settled than the school and the colony were jointly awarded $50,000 by the Garland Fund.[10] A struggle was precipitated which resulted in a split in the colony and threatened the existence of the school. The colony suggested that the school be absorbed directly into the community at the same time that the school was demanding that complete independence was necessary to maintain its standards and intellectual

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[9] Ibid., 33-34.

[10] Ibid., 10-12.

freedom. During the fighting, Zeuch had made no effort to conceal his loyalties to the school and this made it a little easier for Pickett to rally the anti-school forces. When a joint meeting of the colony and the school turned into a showdown between the two men, Pickett received a majority of the support from the colonists. In June, Dr. Zeuch and his supporters agreed to leave as soon as they could finance the move.

The infighting, which had left the colony demoralized, only added to the spirit of the school. Zeuch's hopes were still very much alive when he reported on the decision to move:

> Our experience at New Llano had demonstrated that our plan of education is practicable. The experience of the colony and the school has shown that it is possible for people to live together on a basis of integral cooperation. A properly selected group can function and carry on a social and educational experiment to the point where we may furnish a plan and methods from our combine experiences.[11]

Zeuch, the members of the school and the dissident colonists chose Ink, Arkansas as their new home.[12] After much financial juggling, some land was purchased, but the school had so little cash that the move to Ink had to be done in stages.[13] After the seceeding colonists, led by Job Harriman, had left New Llano and before the school had joined them at Ink, Zeuch and Harriman again struggled over what Zeuch considered a "matter of faith and honor." Harriman had petitioned the

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[11] Ibid., 46.

[12] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), October 18, 1924.

[13] Goodhue, "Notes," 12-13, CCP.

Garland Fund for money for the Ink colony, which Zeuch feared would jeopardize the school's chances for assistance. As New Llano and Ink competed for the school so that they might qualify for the Garland money, Commonwealth found itself caught between two increasingly dictatorial forces and refused to consider a merger of the type required by the fund. Zeuch requested that he be released from any plans to merge Commonwealth and Ink and moved instead to Mena, Arkansas.[14] When New Llano failed to reconcile differences between the community and the school, the Garland Fund money which was to have financed the much-needed sanitation facilities was lost and the colony was doomed to failure. New Llano was soon closed by sanitation officials on the grounds that it constituted a health hazard. The prospects for the colony at Ink were not much better. It struggled along, causing Commonwealth College constant irritation, until its complete financial collapse in April, 1925.[15]

The school, on its own for the first time, lost little time forming a new Commonwealth College Association and adding a student council.[16] While Zeuch appealed to the Garland Fund, the college lived out the winter on "faith and cabbage." In the spring, when the Garland Fund money was available, Commonwealth bought eighty acres outside of Mena. The move was made none too soon to avoid a strained

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[14]Ibid., 72-74; Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), January 1, 1925.

[15]Goodhue, "Notes," 27, CCP.

[16]Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), January 29, 1925.

relationship between the college and the town over several petty issues. Two students, legally married, had been arrested for unlawful cohabitation, sparking much student resentment. Another incident occurred when students opposed the administration of the school and the townspeople on the matter of a dress code, specifically whether or not knickers could be worn by female students in town.[17]

Zeuch, as unofficial head of Commonwealth, spoke at the groundbreaking of the aims of the labor college:

> We break this sod with the hopes that we will mark an epoch in the history of education for workers-and thereby prepare for service directed to the enlightenment of the masses and the reconstruction of society-and with this hope we face the future with confidence.[18]

Zeuch was not alone in trying to impress upon a doubting public that the "unconventionalities" of the Commoners did not detract from their seriousness and sense of duty. Harold Brown, executive secretary of the Commonwealth College Association, summed up the thoughts of the faculty and the students when he said that "the important thing is a will to emancipation."[19] When Kate O'Hare spoke at the opening of the school, she told 250 students and guests that Commonwealth was a "natural outgrowth of the American utopian philosophy," but it was more than this.[20] Zeuch tried to clarify the idea of a labor school in an

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[17] Goodhue, "Notes," 20-21, 35, CCP.

[18] Ibid., 131.

[19] Ibid., 142.

[20] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), December 1, 1925.

article in the school's newspaper, the Fortnightly, entitled "Progressive Workers' Education: A Definition." The Labor School was to create an understanding of social institutions and to increase the power and enlarge the sphere of the working class. The school would not support any political faction, but neither would it deny any.[21]

Despite a second grant from the Garland Fund and donations from everyone from Roscoe Pound, Dean of the Harvard Law School, to Charles Nagel, who had been Secretary of Labor under William Howard Taft, Zeuch was forced to undertake a lecture tour in the spring to raise money for the school to continue.[22] The financial difficulties of the school apparently were not taken seriously by some outsiders. In August, 1926, the Arkansas State American Legion investigated charges that Commonwealth had recently received $100,000 from the radical Industrial Workers of the World and Soviet Russia. If the investigation proved the charges, the American Legion threatened to run the college out of Arkansas.[23] The charges were reiterated in a letter to the Mena Weekly Star and immediately denied by Zeuch, who questioned the right of the American Legion to investigate the college.[24] He was supported in this by the ACLU and together they discouraged the Legion.[25] These charges brought scattered threats of violence which

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[21]Fortnightly, January 1, 1929, CCP.

[22]Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), January 1, 1926; Zeuch to Lucien Koch, undated [April, 1926], CCP; Fortnightly, May 1, 1926, CCP.

[23]Goodhue, "Notes," 151-52, CCP.

[24]Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), August 26, and September 9, 1926.

[25]Goodhue, "Notes," 151-52, CCP.

subsided when adjacent landowners offered protection to the Commoners.[26] The investigation was finally ended when J. Edgar Hoover wrote to Zeuch, denying the existence of the report from which the Legion had supposedly gotten its information,[27] but the red-baiting of the school, which began at this time, only subsided temporarily. It would reappear again and again as Commonwealth became more active.

The inauguration of a Board of Trustees which used tenure to maintain Zeuch and his conservative allies, also tended to divide the school into "liberals" and "conservatives." To appease the liberal and to raise the morale, two non-voting students were added to the Board of Trustees in the spring of 1927.[28] During the summer liberal students who objected to the school's participation in "capitalistic ventures" walked off of their jobs and were immediately expelled by Zeuch, who was growing more conservative each day relative to his students.[29] This incident had far-reaching results: It was viewed as an "insurrection, evidence of an unsuitable administration" by the Garland Fund which soon withdrew any offers of financial aid.[30] Although this did nothing for the morale of the Commoners, they did get a

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[26] Ibid., 152.

[27] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), September 9, 1926.

[28] Fortnightly, February 1, 1927, and April 15, 1927, CCP.

[29] Goodhue, "Notes," 64, CCP.

[30] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), June 21, 1928.

boost when it was discovered that Commonwealth College was included in a list published by the Daughters of the American Revolution of seventy-five organizations of "doubtful" character.[31]

Between 1928 and 1933 student involvement in the administration continued, the school became departmentalized, and Zeuch conducted speaking tours which substantially enriched the resources of the school. By this time the relationship of the school to its neighbors had stabilized. Typically, in the spring of 1931, when a severe drought threatened farmers with ruin, the school responded with food, clothing, and medical aid.[32] A few months later, the school was thrown into a turmoil when townspeople protested that the girls were improperly clad when they wore shorts.[33] These examples hold true for the relationships between the school and the town or the farmers. In their dealings with their farming neighbors, the Commoners were more than successful, but controversies with the town seemed to alienate the citizens of Mena. They further complicated life at the school because Zeuch often sided with the townspeople and against the students.

Zeuch's resignation had earlier been offered and accepted. Now that he was faced with opposition in some minor areas such as student dress, he became convinced that his retirement and replacement by Lucien Koch would be good for the school. It was with few misgivings

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[31] Ibid., May 31, 1928.

[32] Fortnightly, March 1, 1931, CCP.

[33] Goodhue, "Notes," 102-05, CCP.

that Zeuch finally turned over to Koch the experiment on which he had devoted almost ten years of his life. Zeuch probably thought that he had left a school that was stable and economically secure, but he had not counted on the Depression and the havoc that it would play with the Commoners and their neighbors. Zeuch's experiment with worker's education, self-support, educational democracy, and cooperative living had proved itself successful, but, in the depression days of the early 1930's, Zeuch's Commoners wanted more. They had begun to criticize Zeuch's intellectual devotion to reform and to suggest replacing it with an activist reform effort. The choice of Koch could not have pleased the Commoners more.

A MILITANT MISSION

Dr. Zeuch chose as his successor a former Commonwealth student, Lucien Koch. When he returned to Commonwealth to take over the duties of director, Koch had completed a graduate degree at the University of Wisconsin.[1] Koch inherited an active and increasingly militant student body, which must have pleased him, but with the school came the perpetual problems. The financial situation had not been eased by the depression and had been complicated by the fact that the school maintained such a strict posture of non-factionalism. The school-community relationship suffered as student militantcy increased, and the internal frictions continued, an inevitable result of a group of idealistic adolescents trying to work, study and live together.

The change that Koch made in Commonwealth was immediate and drastic. Commonwealth's students were required to actively participate in the labor movement. The primary purpose of the school became the promotion of a militant, aggressive labor movement.[2] Koch left no doubts about his activist tendencies when he said, "Commonwealth is not an institution; it is a movement."[3] Under Koch

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[1] Typed copy of testimony of Lucien Koch before Arkansas legislature, undated [February, 1935], Commonwealth College Papers.

[2] Fortnightly, November 1, 1932, CCP.

[3] Ibid., June 15, 1932.

faculty and students became active in organizing labor unions and in participating in strikes. Koch abandoned Zeuch's "power economics" for an emphasis on drama, literature, and art which could be used to win over laborers to the idea of unionization.[4] He increased the number of students, accepted more militant ones, and gave them a more democratic college.

The first student-faculty participation in the labor movement was a violent one. A group of Commoners traveled to Harlan, Kentucky, to pass out food and copies of the Bill of Rights to coal miners who were striking. They were beaten and threatened with death if they did not leave immediately.[5] When they attempted the same sort of thing in an Illinois coal strike they were again beaten and forced to leave.[6] The Commoners were not deterred by the violence they encountered. Instead they turned their efforts at organization to the nearby cotton farmers who were experiencing increasing distress and were beginning to call for their fair share of the nation's income. Commoners actively advocated the National Farmer's Holiday Association and began to help organize support for local unions.[7] When the Farmer's National Relief Conference met in January, 1933, a delegation of Commonwealth students and faculty attended.[8] Having turned their attention almost

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[4] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), March 10, 1932.

[5] Fortnightly, April 15, 1932, CCP.

[6] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), August 18, 1932.

[7] Fortnightly, September 1, 1932, and October 15, 1932, CCP.

[8] Ibid., February 1, 1933.

entirely to the agricultural discontents was only natural for the Commoners. The farmers were closer to home and, since unionization of farm laborers was almost unheard of, the unique aspects of the farm labor problem offered fertile ground for the young revolutionaries.

In July, 1934, the school began publishing a pro-labor literary magazine, the Winsor Quarterly, which was a successful propaganda tool and moneymaker. Another innovation of 1934, and an unmistakable clue to the changing character of the school, was the establishment of a "museum of social change" which would be a visual "history of the working class and the decadence of capitalism."[9] The museum was introduced with a school contest to name the collection and to give scholarships for the best exhibitions. One of the winning exhibitions was described as "a modern wooden plough and human harness used by sharecroppers who can't afford mules in this day of 'ploughing under'."[10] The museum attracted the attention of people who had never before heard of Commonwealth College and brought reaction of every kind.[11] Koch continued to make changes in the school to keep pace with the changing nature of the faculty and student body. The curriculum was pared down to leave more time for the required participation in the labor movement; summer institutes were begun which brought professional labor organizers and recognized radicals to the school to lecture;[12] faculty

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[9] Ibid., December 1, 1934.

[10] Ibid., April 1, 1935.

[11] Ibid., January 15, 1935.

[12] Ibid., August 15, 1933, and September 15, 1932.

radicalism was evident from the support given to the Socialist Party in Arkansas and student radicalism manifested itself in a strike which involved thirty-three students and resulted in the expulsion of two. The overt reasons for the strike were self-government and admittance of blacks to the school, but the students who were expelled had advocated sacrificing the school's non-factionalism in favor of a Communist line.[13] The strike had a mixed effect. For some it reinforced the school's reputation as non-partisan, for others it revived ideas of a threat of Communism. A rather atypical reaction was offered by the Baltimore Evening Star in an article entitled "Students Is Students": The author saw nothing unusual in a strike at the labor school and compared it to a football rally or a raid on a picture show at more conventional universities.[14]

The Fortnightly undertook to record the changes which Koch had brought about in an article entitled "1933 at Commonwealth." The newspaper proudly reported that:

> Teachers and students of the school have shown steady leftward progress. The class struggle is taken for granted. . . . Liberalism is ruled out. An unflagging effort is made to imbue each student with the notion that radical activity is the only worthwhile activity. In other words, Commonwealth aims to train professional revolutionists.[15]

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[13] Ibid., February 1, 1932, November 1, 1932, and December 15, 1932.

[14] Undated article from Baltimore Evening Star reprinted in Fortnightly, January 1, 1933, CCP.

[15] Fortnightly, March 1, 1934, CCP.

The article re-emphasized the non-factional position of the school, although it mentioned that Socialist and Communist groups had been organized on campus, the Communist group being the larger of the two. Although all that was required for entrance to the school was "a healthy dissatisfaction with the social injustices that afflict the world," more and more of the Commoners were committed to one or the other party, whether or not the school had formally committed itself.[16]

During Koch's tenure, the school first made contact with Claude Williams, a revolutionary Presbyterian minister, at a meeting in which Commoners presented skits showing the value of organization in getting relief and stopping foreclosures. Williams promptly invited the school to send delegates to a "New Era Forum" to explore the relationship of religion to the social problems of the day.[17] The contacts with farmers which were made through Williams reinforced the Commoners idea that "the poor farmers and agricultural workers of this section [were] quite militant."[18] It also showed them what kind of opposition they could expect. Williams was de-frocked and evicted from his house when knowledge of his planned forum leaked out. He became a popular figure among the students and the Fortnightly proclaimed him "Presbyterian in Revolt." The students were amused at the "vague and ancient terms" that Williams used for revolutionary concepts, but agreed that "so long

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[16] Ibid., June 1, 1933.

[17] Ibid., May 15, 1934.

[18] Ibid., June 15, 1934.

as the Old Testament is seen in its proper light, as the story of revolt against oppression, there is no need for condemning its use."[19]

In late summer and fall of 1934 the school kept close tabs on the development of Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Koch predicted that "if the present mood prevails thousands of sharecroppers in Eastern Arkansas will be organized within the next few months . . . unless the planter-inspired open terror makes such action for the moment impossible."[20] The Commoners were anxious to be involved and Koch had corresponded with the Union to offer their help, but without much success until January, 1935, when Ward Rodgers, a Federal Emergency Relief Administration instructor and one of the most active union organizers was jailed in Marked Tree, Arkansas, on charges of anarchy, breach of the peace, conspiracy, and intimidation. H. L. Mitchell wrote that:

> While Rodgers was in jail and every other leader we had was too scared to do anything, I recalled an offer of help made by the director of Commonwealth College, a labor school, at Mena, Arkansas. I wrote Lucien Koch and asked him to come down. I had more help than I bargained for. . . . I put them all to work holding meetings every night.[21]

The delegation from the school was representative of all factions at

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., August 15, 1934, and October 15, 1934.

[21] Typed copy, entitled "Mitchell Manuscript," undated, Southern Historical Collection, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, University of North Carolina. (Hereinafter cited as SHC-STFU.)

Commonwealth: Lucien Koch from the Communist College Association; Bob Reed and Powers Hapgood of the Communist Party; and Atley Delaney of the Socialist Party. This move did not go unnoticed by the press. The Memphis Commerical Appeal reported that "Socialists have rallied to Rodger's defense. Lucien Koch, twenty-seven year old president of Commonwealth College, a co-operative institution, protested Rodgers arrest at a meeting in Tyronza."[22] The reaction of the townspeople was reported by Koch: "Planters have tried persuasion, arresting leaders, creating ill-will between Negroes and whites, and now they are hurling charges of Communism against the Union in an effort to discredit it."[23] Koch and Reed were dragged out of their meeting at Gilmore, Arkansas, and were beaten and jailed, only to be released later with no charges. Rodgers, Koch, Delaney, and Robert Baker met the same kind of resistance at Lepanto, prompting Koch's comment that "the black hole of Calcutta" would compare favorably with the Lepanto jail. In the same week, Powers Hapgood was almost lynched at Birdsong to prevent a Union meeting there. The delegation returned to Commonwealth with a "lynch rope" which was left at the meeting place.[24]

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[22]Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tennessee), January 22, 1935; American Civil Liberties Union Bulletin, February 1, 1935, CCP.

[23]Untitled manuscript written by Koch as a report to Commonwealth College, January 1, 1935, CCP.

[24]Undated affadavit, "Acts of Tyranny and Terror," Socialist Party Archives, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University. (Hereinafter cited as SPA.)

Koch's account of their adventures stirred widespread indignation in the Commoners. He reported that meetings had been harassed by drunk riding bosses, an ex-justice of the peace, and a deputy sheriff, who Koch termed "drunk, frothing madmen."[25] At Marked Tree Koch had opened the meeting with the warning that the "lynch spirit prevails" and he might have been proved correct except that a group of fourteen Union men, "all armed with revolvers and high powered rifles . . . all of them good trigger men," were dispatched to rescue the organizers. Another incident may also have prevented the lynching. Bob Delaney, pretending to be a New York representative of the International Labor Defense, called the sheriff of Marked Tree to inquire into the situation and warn the town about the possible outcome of any violence against the labor leaders. When the delegation had been released and had recovered, they traveled to the site of the next meeting, where they were arrested again within one hour of their arrival and charged with disturbing the peace, obstructing the streets, and barratry. They were later released, when there was no possibility that the meeting would take place.[26]

Commonwealth immediately responded by forming the United Front, composed of the Commonwealth College Association, the

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[25]Telegram, Koch to American Civil Liberties Union, undated, copy found in CCP.

[26]Mitchell to Norman Thomas, February 25, 1935, SPA; Fortnightly, February 15, 1935, CCP. Barratry is a term used in maritime law to indicate a breach of duty by the master of a ship which has caused injury to the owner of the ship or the cargo. There is nothing in the record which suggests that the accused questioned the legitimacy of this charge.

Communist faction at the school, and the local Socialist Party. When others who were not members of these groups showed interest, a miscellaneous group was added. It was hoped that the United Front would result in a state-wide united front which would eventually sponsor a worker's ticket of candidates supported by both parties and the college. A Commonwealth College press release listed these goals of the United Front: to work with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union; to build and aid an organization for the unemployed; to provide defense for laborers through the International Labor Defense; to aid miners; to support anti-lynching bills; and to "build revolutionary student and teacher organizations in the colleges of the state."[27] At the next mass meeting of the STFU the United Front and Polk County International Labor Defense sent an Action Committee to Marked Tree to protest the arrest and conviction of STFU members.[28]

The formation of the United Front and its participation in the labor movement had little effect on the growth of the STFU, but it provoked a legislative investigation of Commonwealth College which revived the red-baiting with which the college had to contend.[29] A special supplement to the Fortnightly explained that "Because Commonwealth College has shown an interest in the wholesale evictions of

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[27]Mimeographed copy of an untitled Commonwealth College press release, January 24, 1935, CCP.

[28]Mimeographed copy of an untitled Commonwealth College press release, undated [c. January, 1935], SPA.

[29]Untitled clipping from South West Times Record, February 3, 1935, CCP.

sharecroppers in Eastern Arkansas and has been active in aiding all Arkansas workers in their struggles, an attempt is being made by powerful interests to destroy the school."[30] The Arkansas Senate and House of Representatives appointed a joint committee "to determine if the college [was] a brooder for Communism."[31] The Little Rock Gazette reported that the legislature felt there was "more than enough evidence that the radical and militant teachings [of Commonwealth College] constitute a threat to organized government." The investigation uncovered "a national Communistic angle" to which the committee attached deep significance. Dr. Zeuch, former director of the school, at one time served as head of the Subsistence Homestead Planning Division of the Federal Housing Administration, with a budget of $50,000, and it was one of the goals of the investigation to determine "whether this might be considered a step toward injection of the college policies into the national government."[32] The investigating committee visited the school, its library, and museum and questioned the faculty and students.[33] After the visit, Representative E. S. Beck said that his opinions had been confirmed--"the college not only teaches Communism and radicalism, but fosters it."[34]

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[30] Fortnightly, February 15, 1935, CCP.

[31] Untitled, unidentified newspaper clipping, February 28, 1935, CCP.

[32] Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), February 18, 1935.

[33] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), February 15, 1935.

[34] Untitled clipping from the Record (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), March 8, 1935, CCP.

The school, preparing to fight for its life, issued this statement: "Commonwealth College will resist to the limit of its own and volunteer resources any effort on the part of the legislature to suppress the college or to hamper its program of workers education." Koch defended the school's action and denied that it was a threat to organized government in Arkansas. Commonwealth was located in the state due to "an accident of economics; the founders had no designs on the state, none on its residents and has only two natives enrolled as students."[35] The controversy raged, with Koch comparing the affair to the Scope's Trial and a Philadelphia paper declaring Arkansas "in the throes of a Red Scare" although "radicalism in Arkansas [was] not really extreme, consisting almost entirely of attempts to organize the sharecroppers in the face of great pressure from people to whom any labor organizer is Red."[36] An interview with the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan of Arkansas brought threats of night-riding or "anything that seems effective" to combat the school.[37]

The report of the Joint Legislative Committee of the Arkansas General Assembly attributed the investigation to claims that Commonwealth was "being used for the teaching of atheism, free love, communism, [and] complete social equality of blacks," but most of the

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[35] Typed copy of testimony of Lucien Koch before Arkansas legislature, undated [March, 1935], CCP.

[36] Untitled clipping from the Record (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), March 8, 1935, CCP.

[37] Untitled, unidentified newspaper clipping, February 28, 1935, CCP.

testimony seemed to dwell on the activities of the Commoners "in aiding joint organization of blacks and whites in which Negroes were among the officers and whose meetings were held in Negro churches." The decision of the investigating committee was that the claims against the school could not be proved, but that "a close check be kept hereafter on the manner in which the principles they advocate are urged to be put into effect . . . and if they may reasonably be thought to cause bloodshed, they be prosecuted."[38] A dissenting opinion claimed that:

> The record is clear that both the Socialist and Communists factions of the college are fostering the dissension in Eastern Arkansas between landlords and tenants. They are militant in advocating that the landlord-tenant system is wrong. The agitators sent out from Commonwealth College are taking advantage of our tense economic condition at the present time in order to excite class hatred, breed racial friction, and promote domestic violence.[39]

Although the investigation formally cleared Commonwealth of all charges, it was only the beginning of the attack on the school. After Senator Clyde Ellis investigated the library at Commonwealth for Communist literature, Representative S. A. Gooch sponsored a bill which changed the penalty for possession of seditious literature from a misdemeanor to a felony.[40] The wording of the bill was so vague that,

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[38]"Synopsis of Report of the Joint Legislative Committee of the Arkansas General Assembly," printed copy, undated, found in CCP.

[39]Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), March 12, 1935.

[40]Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), February 15, 1935.

according to the Commoners, "the writings of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and passages of the Declaration of Independence, [could] be interpreted as seditious."[41] H. L. Mitchell, realizing that the attack on the school had been prompted by the Commoner's connection with STFU, wrote that due to the ambiguous wording of the bill "free speech would be a dead letter."[42] One section of the bill which read "Where death shall result from any unlawful act herein forbidden, the person shall suffer the death penalty" prompted Norman Thomas to remark, "Apparently Arkansas is to become the first out-right Fascist State in America."[43] Koch immediately protested the Gooch Bill and demanded open hearings on the bill, which he felt would "mark the death of civil liberties in the South." The ACLU condemned both the sedition bill and the legislative investigation, calling for an investigation of the "lawlessness of officials and landlords against the sharecroppers rather than . . . into the views of a college which has a national reputation as a progressive labor school."[44] Protest prior to the hearing on the Gooch Bill had little effect; an anti-sedition bill was proposed and defeated.[45] Gooch defended the action on the grounds that "to recall it would be making monkeys out of ourselves," but the opposition saw

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[41]Fortnightly, March 1, 1935, CCP.

[42]H. L. Mitchell and Howard Kester, "Sharecropper Misery and Hope," The Nation, CXLII (February 12, 1936), 185.

[43]Thomas to Mitchell, February 26, 1935, SPA.

[44]Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), February 20, 1935.

[45]Ibid., March 15, 1935.

the bill in broader terms. Representative Manner explained that those who had originally voted for the bill "had done so under misapprehension," that the bill meant more than "the defeat of those who voted for it. It would stop freedom of the press and freedom of speech."[46] When the hearings finally resulted in the bill being recalled, the Commoners found their victory short-lived. A second sedition bill was introduced by Representatives Marcus Miller and Minor Milwee which made "the act of advocating anarchy, Communism or overthrow of any established government by force or violence" a nuisance which could be suppressed by injunction of the chancery courts. Miller and Milwee had both been members of the investigating committee and the bill was correctly interpreted as a direct threat to the school.[47] One Commoner characterized it as "grim evidence of the bankruptcy of the investigating committee's findings" and Koch again protested the sedition legislation, arguing that it was no improvement over the Gooch Bill. "You are just swapping a carbuncle for a boil. Both bills are direct threats to civil liberties and Commonwealth College is one of the victims."[48] The hearings on the new bill provoked heated responses. An advocate of the nuisance bill admitted that he knew little of Commonwealth but was convinced that their teachings "were as rotten as Hades . . . and [would] ultimately lead to the destruction of manhood and womanhood."[49]

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[46] Ibid., March 1, 1935.

[47] Ibid., March 7, 1935.

[48] Ibid., March 9, 1935.

[49] Ibid., March 11, 1935.

The letters which criticized the nuisance bill did so on two levels. Some protested the bill "wholly apart from the Commonwealth College controversy and the trouble with landlords and tenants" but others saw this as the crux of the matter. "The nuisance bill has no other purpose than that of silencing those who believe that human rights should be placed above property rights; that the economic security of labor is more important than private profits of capital."[50] The hearings resulted in the defeat of the second bill, also.

The unsuccessful attempts to censor Commonwealth did not discourage its participation in the labor movement. When criticisms of the college began to include the Union, Koch and the Commoners tried to refuse them. Koch told a meeting at Parkin that the "Union is not Communist. Its purposes are merely to formulate a fair contract between tenants and landowners to deal with illegal evictions and to obtain the parity payments for sharecroppers as provided for in the government contract."[51]

The school's association with STFU and the labor movement was continued through Koch's term as president of Commonwealth. When more than 100 Poinsett County families were evicted in the winter of 1935, Commonwealth helped to make arrangements for a tent-city. At the same time that the sharecroppers were being evicted, the planters of Marked Tree offered "to take care of needy homefolks,"

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[50] Ibid., March 1, 1935, and March 2, 1935.

[51] Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tennessee), February 1, 1935.

to avoid "any 'horning in' by outside agitators." The Marked Tree Co-operative Association pledged a 10 percent increase in employments and adopted the slogan "Marked Tree takes care of its own."[52] The Union picketed the planters' union and consulted Commonwealth organizers before the Union policy on the planter-run union was implemented.[53] When a meeting at Earle was broken up and two people disappeared, members of Commonwealth were among those sent to investigate.[54] Unfortunately, the investigation was unsuccessful and the two sharecroppers were never heard from again. The Commoner's participation in the labor movement had, by this time, progressed to the point that the Memphis Commerical Appeal wrote "With Ward Rodgers, Lucien Koch, president of Commonwealth, and several of its students have taken leadership in the Union's movement in Northeast Arkansas."[55] Members of Commonwealth had attended trials of Union organizers, J. R. Butler, president and one of the founders of the Union, had joined that faculty of the college, groups of sharecroppers had been given scholarships to Commonwealth, and delegations from the labor school had attended several conferences for relief and civil and trade rights.[56]

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[52]Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), March 3, 1935.

[53]Ibid., March 7, 1935.

[54]Willie Sue Blagden, "Arkansas Flogging," The New Republic, LXXXVII (July 1, 1936), 178.

[55]Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tennessee), February 13, 1935.

[56]Mitchell to John Herling, February 28, 1935; untitled, mimeographed copy of Commonwealth College press release, February 4, 1936, SPA; Fortnightly, April 15, 1935, May 1, 1935, and June 1, 1935, CCP.

It was almost impossible for Koch to participate with the students in the labor movement and to attend the business of the school. Four "life or death" notices appeared in the Fortnightly during Koch's administration and the financial situation forced him to begin lecture tours to raise money.[57] During Koch's administration, however, the school's curriculum kept pace with the desires of the increasingly radical student body and the school became an established force in the labor movement.

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[57] Fortnightly, May 15, 1932, May 1, 1933, April 15, 1934, October 15, 1934, and May 15, 1932, CCP.

RADICALISM AND REPRESSION

Lucien Koch left Commonwealth College at a time when the school was enlarging its sphere of action and when the Union was receiving nationwide publicity. Just as there was little evidence of internal friction which would have caused Koch to leave, neither does the external situation seem to have deteriorated so as to present the "unpostponable obligations" to which Koch referred in his farewell address.[1] Koch's leadership was not seriously challenged by anyone, certainly by no one more competent. From all information available there seem to have been no extenuating circumstances in this change of leadership. Whatever the reason for Koch leaving, his resignation proved to be most unfortunate for the school. The new director was Richard Whitten, executive secretary of the New Orleans local of the Socialist Party and past National Chairman of the Student League for Industrial Democracy.[2] While Whitten's membership in the Socialist Party was no secret, he apparently believed in the value of a non-factional labor school and emphasized this in his opening address: "I believe whole-heartedly in non-factional labor education at this stage of the developing labor movement and will do everything in my power

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[1] Fortnightly, September 1, 1935, Commonwealth College Papers.

[2] Ibid.,

to see that Commonwealth remains a non-factional worker's school."[3] Whitten's program for the school, not only less militant, but also more varied than that of Koch, emphasized the role that the college could play by giving scholarships to sharecroppers.[4] The first dozen scholarships were offered for the spring of 1936 as a part of Whitten's "southern orientation" and were hailed by the Fortnightly as "undoubtedly the most distinctive and important single feature" of the quarter.[5] The Union cooperated, expressing its gratitude in an open letter from Mitchell to the Fortnightly but private correspondence by Mitchell still showed his anxiety about dealings with the college. The scholarship program was continued through the next school year, with a special curriculum for the new students.[6]

Although the scholarship program was implemented through the Union, it was not necessarily to have been limited to Union members. Other efforts instituted by Whitten were, however, direct efforts to help STFU. Throughout Whitten's administration, and especially after J. R. Butler, President of STFU, became an instructor at the school, collections were taken at student gatherings, special evening programs were given by the students so that a small admission could be charged, and benefit dances were given at Commonwealth for the students and

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., November 1, 1935.

[5] Ibid., undated clipping reprinted from Labor News.

[6] Ibid., July 1, 1935. Mitchell's anxiety about Commonwealth is evident in his correspondence with Butler, February 2, 1936, Southern Historical Collection, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers.

surrounding farmers. Collections were initially for money, but during the Union's strike, when eviction rates soared, collections of food and clothing were not unusual. Many of these collections were taken up by the United Front, which remained active even while the school's militantcy was declining.[7]

Another manifestation of Whitten's "southern orientation" was a changed curriculum. The school had offered remedial academic courses to the sharecroppers, but regular students were also offered new courses in farm problems and unionization.[8] For the first time since before Koch had become director, the curriculum was being enlarged rather than trimmed. This emphasis on the classroom was reminiscent of Zeuch, distinguished only by Whitten's choice of practical courses as opposed to Zeuch's theoretical bent. Another curriculum change made to accommodate the Union was the addition of Union workshops, "short term, intensive education in principles and background of united action by agricultural workers."[9]

During Whitten's administration the College attended conventions of STFU, sometimes sending speakers. At the Second Annual Convention of the Union, the College sent Bob Reed, a student who was especially active in helping organize STFU locals, to Little Rock to

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[7] Fortnightly, November 1, 1935, CCP.

[8] Whitten to Mitchell, February 24, 1936; Arthur R. Skreberg to Mitchell, January 7, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[9] Fortnightly, January 15, 1936, CCP.

speak on the "youth question."[10] At the convention, delegates from Commonwealth were presented a unanimous resolution expressing the gratitude of 25,000 sharecroppers from six states for the "independent political action" of the College.[11]

Richard Whitten's "southern orientation" was much less militant, much less activist than the program of Lucien Koch, although individuals at the school still offered some help to the Union. Suggestions were made for new locals, youth locals, and various publicity gimmicks,[12] but organized efforts were limited to the farmers surrounding the College and to the town of Mena.[13] Students stayed closer to the campus, classes were an important part of the college again, and efforts to organize locals in northeastern Arkansas or to hold mass meetings were almost completely discontinued. Other activities designed to take their place were only partially successful and it is doubtful that the Commoners would have been so agreeable if not for the presence at the College of J. R. Butler, President of STFU.[14] Butler acted as liason, passing information of the Union to the College and forwarding to the Union encouragement and offers to

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[10]"Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention," SHC-STFU.

[11]Fortnightly, January 15, 1936, CCP.

[12]Walter Moskop to Mitchell, February 2, 1936; Whitten to Mitchell, April 15, 1936; and Roy Morelock to "Comrade" [Mitchell], May 6, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[13]Whitten to Mitchell, April 13, 1936; Rosie Lee Morelock to Mitchell, April 13, 1936, SHC-STFU; Fortnightly, May 1, 1936, CCP.

[14]Fortnightly, February 1, 1936, CCP.

help.[15] He used the school newspaper to give students the latest news on the Union and for publicity which the Union needed outside the school.[16] He also used connections made at the College to provide new sources of contributions to the Union and to increase the number of scholarships available.[17] Although the attempts to increase publicity were not very successful, Butler served the useful function of keeping the school in touch and in sympathy with the Union and of attempting to stabilize the strained relations between Mitchell and the College.

Unfortunately relations with the Union were not the only one showing signs of strain. Relationships with the farmers had always been better than those with the townspeople of Mena, but the college had never been bitterly attacked by either group. Although student activism had decreased during Whitten's two years as director, an institute offered during the summer of 1936 brought as much disapproval as the most militant activities initiated by Koch. Commonwealth College housed the Southern Workers' Anti-War Summer School, a project financed by Quakers, which offered scholarships to sharecroppers and

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[15]Butler to Evelyn Smith, February 1, 1936; Butler to Mitchell and Kester, February 1, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[16]Butler to Mitchell, Smith, Kester, January 29, 1936; Butler to Smith, January 31, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[17]Butler to Mitchell, January 22, 1936, February 3, 1936, and March 1, 1936; Butler to Smith, January 27, 1936 and January 28, 1936, SHC-STFU.

could have been the basis for future aid for Commonwealth.[18] The anti-war institute was partially responsible for precipitating the attacks which were begun in the fall of 1936 by L. D. Summers, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Mena, Arkansas.

Whitten resigned at the end of the summer of 1936 to devote his time to the Socialist Party.[19] He was replaced by Acting Director Arthur Skreberg and Secretary-Treasurer Charlotte Muskowitz.[20] Whitten's timing was unfortunate, for the school was left without an effective leader at a crucial time. Reverend Summers accused the school of subversive activities, verifying his claims with a book by Elizabeth Dillings, The Red Network, which was purported to be a list of subversive organizations within the United States. Commonwealth was included. In spite of inadequate evidence to support Mrs. Dillings' claims about the organizations which she included, Summers was not to be deterred. When Charlotte Muskowitz, Executive Secretary of Commonwealth College Association, attempted a reply in which she wrote "Commonwealth College is openly on the side of the farmers and workers but it is neither obligated nor attached to any particular party or group,"[21] Summers attacked the reply as evidence of the school's

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[18] Fortnightly, May 15, 1936, and August 15, 1936, CCP; Whitten to Butler and Mitchell, October 20, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[19] Fortnightly, October 1, 1936, CCP.

[20] Ibid., October 15, 1936, and November 1, 1936.

[21] Open letter, Muskowitz to Polk County, Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), undated, clipping in CCP.

incrimination.[22] The Pastor ended one of his sermons by quoting from a report of the Fish Committee on Communism of the state legislature:

> To further convince you, my friends, that Commonwealth College in Polk County, is a Communist institution, they send their students to every section of the country where there is confusion or disturbance between the employer and employes, where there are strikes, farm troubles, or race troubles.[23]

At about this same time, but after the attacks by Summer had begun, Nolen Bullock, a reporter from Liberty magazine visited Commonwealth, attempted to disguise his true identity, and enrolled as a student. When it became obvious that he was trying to bring out differences of opinion and generally to increase tension within the school, he was discovered, questioned regarding his motives, and forced to leave. Not surprisingly, his article, "Rah, Rah Russia," reiterated Summer's charges of Communism and accused the students of practicing free love.[24] The school blamed the reporter for trying "to provide the basis for the destruction of the only residential southern labor school" and reprinted a letter in the Fortnightly from the college to Robert LaFollette, chairman of the federal Civil Liberties Committee, which stated that the article compounded the danger "that

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[22]Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), December 31, 1936.

[23]Typed copy of sermon, L. D. Summers, "Communism and Commonwealth College Unmasked," CCP.

[24]Fortnightly, December 15, 1936, CCP; Nolen Bullock, "Rah, Rah Russia," Liberty, December, 1936, 34-36.

local Polk County persons may be stimulated to do violence to Commonwealth College."[25] Encouraged by the publicity, Summers continued his charge of Communism, added Bullock's charge of free love, and concluded that the school was "red, atheist, and for social equality and free love."[26]

The result of this attack was the introduction into the state legislature of a new sedition bill. In January, 1936, S. Herman Horton of the state legislature introduced a bill calling for a sentence of one to five years for anyone teaching communism, any official of a school allowing or encouraging free love, or anyone teaching free love.[27] The legislature's attack received nationwide publicity in which both the proponents and opponents of the bill agreed that it was aimed at Commonwealth.[28] The school immediately protested the attacks by Summers, Bullock, and Horton and told of plans by Horton to introduce a bill calling for a loyalty oath and of the formation of a citizens' committee in Mena to outlaw the school.[29] When the bill received a favorable recommendation from the Arkansas House Committee on Education,

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[25] Fortnightly, December 15, 1936, and January 1, 1937, CCP.

[26] Ibid., January 1, 1937.

[27] Ibid., January 15, 1937; Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), January 24, 1937.

[28] Undated article from the Evening Sun (Baltimore, Maryland), reprinted in Fortnightly, February 15, 1937, CCP.

[29] Ibid., January 15, 1937, and February 1, 1937.

Commonwealth submitted a formal resolution to the legislature which not only denied the charges but attempted to explain the real reasons for the attack:

> We cannot overlook the fact that the present bill following so close upon the work of these three professional publicity seekers is aimed at our college. And since two of them come from the cotton-planters' territory in East Arkansas we are forced to see the similarity between their prejudiced statements and the attitude of big property interests in that part of the state. That is, any institution predominantly concerned with an attempt to remedy the deplorable working and living conditions of large numbers of our people, such as Commonwealth College, is a dangerous institution and must be hampered and insulted in every way possible, by fair means or foul.[30]

The same sentiment was expressed in "A Beautitude for Commonwealth" in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

> Commonwealth has simply become troublesome to the element which would profit by keeping its part of the South in the state of the Belgian Congo in the bad old days. And the severity of the reaction indicates that Commonwealth is at least getting somewhere. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you"--for it means that the culprits have felt the lash.[31]

The sedition bill received nationwide publicity, most of it bad. The American Civil Liberties Union and the International Juridical Association protested the bill and this was reinforced by many of the

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[30]"Resolution of Commonwealth College Re: House Bill 148," CCP.

[31]Undated article from the Post-Dispatch (St. Louis, Missouri), reprinted in Fortnightly, February 15, 1937, CCP.

out-of-state newspapers.[32] Some support was also offered the school from organized labor.[33] Liberals everywhere, including a distant group of Rhodes scholars, sent letters of protest to the legislature and when the bill came up for a vote it was defeated forty-six to nineteen.[34] The attack had threatened the very life of the school, but, with the exception of drawing up a discipline code, the internal operations of the school continued as usual.[35]

Relations with the surrounding communities never recovered. The most recent sedition bill came at a time when relations between the Union and the College were reaching a climax. The Union, and especially Mitchell, had always tried to keep Commonwealth at enough of a distance to insure the safety of the Union in case of an investigation or red scare such as the school was subjected to periodically. Almost a year before the 1937 attack on the school, Mitchell wrote Butler, who at that time was President of STFU and on the faculty of the College:

> I do think that it is very bad strategy for the Union to be a part of Commonwealth College. It is OK for us to send students for training but the President of STFU should never be a member of the staff, subjecting the organization to attack on that score. As old Nunnally used to say to me, we have got to be as wise as owls and appear gentle as lambs.[36]

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[32] Ibid., February 15, 1937.

[33] Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), January 2, 1937.

[34] Fortnightly, March 1, 1937, March 15, 1937, CCP.

[35] Ibid., January 1, 1937.

[36] Mitchell to Butler, February 2, 1936, SHC, STFU.

A few months later Mitchell visited Commonwealth, reporting to Norman Thomas that:

> Whitten was not there and I do not distrust him other than the fact that he doesn't always know what is going on with the group that runs the place. The same old crowd is in control, with perhaps a bit more realistic line. It will take ten years for them to live down their past.[37]

This was typical of the attitude of the Union leaders from the beginning and was usually gracefully accepted by the school. The Union, spread out geographically and made up of men and women who must be employed by exactly the people that they were attacking, sought to avoid the taint of Communism, free love, and atheism which marked the school. The Commoners realized that the school's physical isolation and seclusion protected them from this dependence and afforded them a degree of freedom from the problems of their neighbors. But the Commoners' patience with the less militant Union wore thin occasionally, as in the case of the cotton strike. Union members, striking to raise wages, met with mass evictions and terrorism. The Union held out until a victory of sorts could be claimed then effected a compromise settlement. The idealistic students, preferring an unqualified victory, voiced their displeasure with Mitchell, who they thought "had sold out the strike."[38] One of the more excitable students, Walter Moskop, who was a member of STFU and had probably been influenced by the

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[37] Mitchell to Thomas, April 27, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[38] Ibid.

dissident elements in the Union, tried to murder Mitchell.[39] Moskop was expelled from the Union and packed off to California by the College, but Mitchell, conveniently ignoring Moskop's membership in the Union, held the school completely responsible. The affair was kept quiet because Mitchell realized that publicity would mean a loss of funds and prestige for the Union, but it was partially responsible for an important stand that Mitchell would later take against the College.[40]

Shortly after the Moskop incident the Third Annual Convention of STFU adopted a resolution stating that "colleges such as Brookwood and Commonwealth College or that political parties had never been associated with STFU."[41] The Union was at that time attempting affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations through a newly formed union, United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America. Apparently the price of affiliation, disavowal of connections with Commonwealth, was set by Dave Fowler, a district president of United Mining Workers of America, who had previously tangled with Claude Williams, an ardent supporter of the College. This disavowal of Commonwealth by the Union was at least partially due to the personal fears which Mitchell harbored about the school. The price, which seemed fair to Union leaders who badly needed CIO affiliation and who

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[39]Donald Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 63.

[40]Gardner Jackson to Mitchell, October 21, 1936, SHC-STFU.

[41]Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), January 18, 1937.

already hated and feared Commonwealth, was rationalized to many in the way that Howard Kester explained it to American Civil Liberties Union President Roger Baldwin:

> After interviewing those from all walks of life in the area primarily served by Commonwealth, or more correctly, which should be served by Commonwealth, we found practically unanimous agreement among all those with whom we talked that Commonwealth, as it is being administered at the moment, is of no service whatever to the labor movement of this area. Some were inclined to regard it as an absolute liability and detriment. Further, it was held that under the present management there is no possibility of it being otherwise . . . there is some feeling that the school should be closed. . . . Had the college actively and militantly participated in the terrific struggles of the several working class organizations in this area in a helpful manner such an attack [as in Liberty magazine and in the legislature's most recent sedition bill] would be understandable, but to the contrary, it has on several occasions launched the most indefensible attacks against the most militant organizations in the region, among them the STFU.[42]

The Union's action in this matter shocked the school. For the College to have been censured for a lack of militantcy and activism was indeed unusual. But the violent response to the passing of the resolution by the STFU convention came not from the school but from Williams, who must have realized that the school was suffering not for its own past actions, but for those of Williams. Calling Dave Fowler "racketeering, red-baiting, and dictatorial," he wrote Gardner Jackson that

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[42]Kester to Baldwin, January 8, 1937, SHC-STFU.

the agreement between Jackson, Mitchell, and Kester to break with the school would not only enhance "the already too pronounced bureaucratic trends in the policies of STFU but would encourage Commonwealth's enemies in their attempts to pass a sedition bill.[43] Williams offered, during this crisis, to help with a re-organization of Commonwealth, but this was not immediately enacted.

Charlotte Moskowitz left Commonwealth in July of 1937 and the secretary-treasurership was taken over by Donald Kobler, but no meaningful changes occurred until late summer when Williams became director of the school, revising the constitution and re-organizing according to "wishes earlier expressed" by the Union.[44] Williams called for re-orientation of Commonwealth "into a working alliance with trade and agricultural unions" in response to the emergence of the CIO and the attempt to unify the agricultural movement through the formation of the UCAPAWA.[45] Under the re-organization the Commonwealth College Association contained members from "professional groups and the labor movement," in other words, persons not connected with Commonwealth as students or faculty, and the association became the only policymaker.[46]

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[43]Williams to Jackson, January 23, 1937, SHC-STFU.

[44]Williams to Butler, September 8, 1937, SHC-STFU; Fortnightly, August 15, 1937, CCP.

[45]Fortnightly, August 15, 1937, CCP.

[46]Williams to Butler, September 8, 1937, SHC-STFU.

College students again turned to field work, although it was quite different from that of the Koch years and on a much smaller scale. Commoners visited established locals of the Union, publicizing the affiliation of STFU with the CIO and describing the co-op canneries, medical centers, and Union-owned stores which were supposed to result.[47] The school developed an extension program which was partially operative by the end of the first year of re-organization. In a 1939 survey of the educational program of organized labor, the greatest number and variety of courses was reported by Commonwealth.[48]

Naturally the school benefitted from a full-time active director. New programs which reflected Williams' background as a minister were initiated. Williams felt that the church had not fulfilled its role but nonetheless felt that since "religion was the dominant and often the only cultural element in the life of the Southern sharecropper," the labor union must use this.[49] Williams' insight was born out by the testimony of a sharecropper that "I knew that there was a word, union, but I was just like all the other people over in Wynn. . . . I thought it was a new church."[50] Warning that "religion shouldn't be confused with

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[47] Fortnightly, December 15, 1937, CCP.

[48] Ibid., October 15, 1937, and January 15, 1938; Ruth Owens, "The Educational Program of Organized Labor in the United States, 1926-1939," an undated, mimeographed copy found in CCP.

[49] Commoner, August, 1938, CCP. The Fortnightly was discontinued in the reorganization of the school and replaced by a monthly newspaper, the Commoner.

[50] Fortnightly, July 1, 1936, CCP.

reaction," Williams held a Cotton Preachers Institute to emphasize the role of the religious leader as organizer.[51]

Although the Cotton Preachers Institute was endorsed by the fourth Annual Convention of STFU,[52] the general program of the school was not and when Williams spoke to the next annual meeting of the re-organized Commonwealth College Association, he answered their charges that the school was not an effective part of the Southern labor movement:

> Commonwealth has made a substantial contribution to the STFU from its inception. Staff members probably saved the organization in the early days by facing terror when union officials had been forced to flee.[53]

Williams accused the Union of irresponsible publicity regarding the school and specifically accused Mitchell and Butler, who had just refused to send Union members to Commonwealth, of red-baiting and calling Commonwealth "a bunch of damn Jews who ought to be run back to New York."[54]

After this confrontation Williams followed his own inclinations rather than those of the Union. In the summer of 1938, Williams visited the home of Butler and left a coat there in which he had inadvertently placed a paper containing, according to Williams, "an individual

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[51] Commoner, August, 1938, CCP.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Claude Williams, "Report to Commonwealth College Association, 1938," CCP.

[54] Ibid.

appraisal of the work of the school as a suggestion of possible sources of support to remedy the chronic financial ills."[55] The paper, immediately branded a "secret document" by Butler, was addressed to the Communist Party of the United States and said, in part, "If we think of the United States as a war map on which flags are stuck as troops move into new territory, then clearly it is time our Party stuck a flag in at Mena, Arkansas." There followed recommendations for establishing financial ties with the school which would lead to substantial control of the school.[56] Butler's reaction was not disapproval of either the Communist Party or of Williams possibly being a member, but that "under the guise of friendship [Williams] worked to disrupt the STFU in its basic principle of being strictly non-partisan."[57] Butler requested the immediate resignation of Williams from the Executive Council of STFU on the basis that the document proved "conclusively that [Williams] connived and that [he was] still attempting to connive with the Communist Party to 'capture' the STFU for the Communist Party."[58] Commonwealth issued a newsletter containing explanations by Williams and a student

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[55]Untitled newsletter circulated as a special mailing to subscribers of the Commoner, credited to Kobler, secretary-treasurer of Commonwealth, August 31, 1938, CCP. (Hereinafter cited as Kobler, untitled newsletter, CCP.)

[56]Original typed document found in Williams' coat pocket, undated, filed with STFU before August 22, 1938, SHC-STFU.

[57]Butler to Williams, August 22, 1938, SHC-STFU.

[58]Ibid.

who claimed to have written the document as a part of a classroom exercise devoted to fundrais ing and a statement by Butler withdrawing his request for Williams' resignation.[59]

The Executive Council of the Union met to hear the case and took up Butler's demands that Williams tender his resignation. The issue, regardless of the authorship of the document, concerned whether or not it comprised official Commonwealth policy. Williams maintained that it did not because the Commonwealth College Association and the faculty had not been notified of it. Kester, who felt that it represented the point of view of the college even if it was not formally decreed, was supported by the remainder of the Executive Council of the Union and Williams was expelled from both the Council and the Union.[60] Williams, who would not admit defeat, appealed again at the STFU convention in December. By this time he had become convinced of an Executive Council conspiracy which not only attacked him but was a danger to the Union itself.[61] The appeal, which was perfunctorily denied, came at a time when the Executive Council was at its weakest, making the charges of conspiracy seem all the more ridiculous. Butler had resigned, E. B. McKinney, dissident black minister and member of the STFU Executive Council, had been removed at the same time as Williams,

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[59] Kobler, untitled newsletter, CCP.

[60] "Case of Claude Williams," heard before the Executive Council of STFU, September 16 and 17, 1938. Typed copy found in SHC-STFU.

[61] "Convention Minutes," December, 1938, mimeographed copy found in SHC-STFU.

and the Union leaders who remained were arguing among themselves about the Union's affiliation with the CIO.[62]

Commonwealth's relations with neighbors were severly damaged by this publicity and by January, 1939, loss of financial support and students forced the school to close until April. During this time the Commonwealth College Association met to consider a merger with Highlander, a less activist labor school in Monteagle, Tennessee, on the grounds that Commonwealth was "not sufficiently useful to the labor movement . . . to justify its continuation." The Association would not consider the merger.[63]

Commonwealth re-opened, half-heartedly fighting against the poll tax and for a federal anti-lynch law, but a major fire closed the school again before the month was out.[64] After these setbacks the situation was further complicated when the school re-opened and a local woman's club filed a protest with the Dies Committee and Williams, who was ill, resigned.[65] He was replaced by Morris Engel, who accepted the position of director but left the duties of the post to the executive secretary, David Beardsley.[66]

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[62] Commoner, September, 1938, CCP.

[63] Typed copy of "Minutes of Commonwealth College Association," February 20, 1939, CCP.

[64] Los Owen to Mildred Haessler, undated [c. February, 1940], CCP; Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), April 20, 1939.

[65] Commoner, April, 1939, CCP.

[66] Ibid., August, 1939.

When the Commonwealth College Association met at the beginning of the 1939 school year, they adopted the suggestions that had resulted from a summer-long self-study, but no practical changes were ever effected.[67] In spite of another administrative change, when Engles resigned and was replaced by Nathan Oser, the school struggled along, neither overcoming its difficulties, nor being defeated by them. In June, 1940, Summer and the American Legion launched a joint attack on Commonwealth.[68] Soon violence broke out between the townspeople and students.[69] J. P. Quillin, Deputy Prosecuting Attorney for Mena, brought charges against the school for teaching anarchy by not flying the flag of the United States and by displaying a forbidden emblem, a hammer and sickel painted on the floor of a wellhouse.[70] Within two weeks the school had been brought to trial and fined $2,500. Since the amount was far in excess of its ability to pay, a date was set for the auction of the school's property to pay the fine. When questioned about his methods, Quillen responded:

> Maybe it was not quite regular, but, after all, some of those fellows at Commonwealth had advocated Nazi methods, so I felt that I could send out my own stormtroopers to do a job that should have been done long ago.[71]

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[67] Ibid., September, 1939.

[68] Ibid., February, 1940; Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), June 13, 1940.

[69] Weekly Star (Mena, Arkansas), June 24, 1940.

[70] Ibid., September 12, 1940; Gazette (Little Rock, Arkansas), September 23, 1940.

[71] Star (Kansas City, Kansas), December 1, 1940, clipping in CCP.

With the exception of one student, the Commoners hardly bothered to come to their own defense. Clay Fulk testified that the school was not even in session at the time Quillin brought the charges. The lack of defense probably represented a practical response to the situation. Quillin had behind him public support and an Arkansas law which did not require that he prove anarchy or acts of violence. The statute made it

> unlawful for any person to write, dictate, speak, utter, or declare, or be interested in writing, dictating, speaking, uttering, or declaring any word or abetting in the infliction of personal injury upon any person or destruction of property or in any manner to disseminate knowledge or propaganda which tends to destroy or overthrow the present government.[72]

After seventeen years and 1500 graduates,[73] Commonwealth was closed. The school had enjoyed a degree of stability during the administrations of Dr. Zeuch, who had laid the intellectual foundations for the labor school, and Lucien Koch, who directed the Commoners toward activism, but, paradoxically, these very men were responsible for shaping a school whose chances of survival were not good. A blending of radical intellectualism and political activism such as Commonwealth represented, would be a constant threat, and, therefore, would be constantly threatened. Attacks on Commonwealth did not

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[72]Untitled, undated clipping [c. September, 1940], Star (Kansas City, Kansas), CCP.

[73]Mimeographed copy, untitled news release, by Carl Haessler, July 12, 1940, CCP.

begin until faculty and students became active participants in STFU and became fatal when the Union support was withdrawn. STFU, which at an earlier time had generally agreed with the beliefs of the Commoners, had, by 1938, come to disapprove of their brand of radicalism. Inspite of personal conflicts and financial tension between the leaders of the Union and the college, the basic conflict was ideological. The Union was committed to a program of reform, the college to one of revolution. As economic conditions improved and a conservativism was injected into the domestic mood by the beginning of another world war, the Union was able to adjust. Commonwealth's peak of radicalism unfortunately came at a time when the school was weakest and public sentiment was growing more conservative, but, given the nature of the school, the repression which occurred at this time was almost inevitable.

APPENDIX A

ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS

The education but not the schooling of the applicant is taken into account. His purpose in life, his interest in the labor movement and his general intelligence are of the first importance. His temperament, so far as it can be determined, is taken into account, since the life at Commonwealth makes unusual demands upon the individual.

Each applicant must furnish a health certificate and must answer certain general questions concerning himself and his mental equipment. To be accepted he need not attempt to answer every question, for these questions are not intended as a test of his information. Neither should it be assumed that Commonwealth attempts to impart all of the knowledge implied in the questions.

The questions are as follows:

1. Write a 1,000 word autobiography, emphasizing your schooling and your experience, if any, in industry and in the labor movement.

2. Why do you wish to come to Commonwealth?

3. State approximately what amount of leisure you have had within the past five years (Including Sundays and holidays) and tell how you have spent such leisure.

4. State the arguments for and against compelling the individual to modify his personal behavior to fit the welfare of the group to which he belongs.

5. Are you interested in writing? Have you had anything published? Give details. If English is not your native tongue tell how long you have been studying it.

6. Tell what you think of one or more of the following men: Lenin, Mussolini, Wilson, Hoover, Ramsey MacDonald.

7. Name some books, authors, magazines and newspapers that you admire.

8. Give your opinions on one of the following subjects: Democracy, Capitalism, Socialism, Americanism, Imperialism, Anarchism.

9. Explain your religious beliefs, your political beliefs.

10. Quote a stanza of poetry which you admire. Name a picture you admire. A piece of music.

11. Describe and tell what you think of a good movie you have witnessed.

12. What real significance do you see in the so-called revolt of modern youth? How do you explain that revolt?

13. Tell a good joke.

On December 1, 1931, the Fortnightly published this list of entrance requirements.

APPENDIX B

[Copy of Claude Williams' document discovered by J. R. Butler]

A meeting was held last night at Commonwealth College of 20 faculty. Maintenance and Administration workers who are Party Members. The total number of Faculty, Maintenance and Administration workers at the College is 25.

A visitor to the College, also a Party member, said: "If we think of the United States as a war map on which flags are stuck as the troops move into new territory, then clearly it is time our Party stuck a flag in at Mena, Arkansas."

A committee was appointed to draw up a report to Party headquarters on the present situation at Commonwealth. The report follows.

1. The situation from a Party standpoint at Commonwealth is known to the District Organizer at St. Louis, with whom the College has been working closely. But we wish to draw the attention of national headquarters to the very great national importance of the College to our Party at the present time.

2. Since the reorganization of the school in August 1937, when a Party member became director of the school [Claude Williams], there has been on the campus complete political unity, an absence of such outside or disturbing elements as previously existed, and a conscientious adherence to the Party program in all the educational and field work. The figures quoted in par. 1 above show the numerical situation in faculty and administration, and it may correctly be said that students who are not members when they arrive almost invariably become members either here or immediately after they leave.

3. Since the reorganization the school, in addition to unifying and strengthening its resident program, has greatly developed its working relationship with the Southern labor and democratic movements.

(a). Claude Williams is a member of the National Exec. Council of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, has played a decisive part in insisting upon progressive union policies, and has carried the need for a militantly progressive program to thousands of rank-and-file members who have the greatest confidence in him.

(b). The school has not only given resident instruction to members of the STFU but has conducted field classes as well (for example an interracial Institute for preacher members of the union was held at Little Rock from July 27 to August 1.)

(c). The school has the full support of the Arkansas State office of the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union. Two students have been commissioned as organizers and the school has conducted an extensive educational and organizational campaign on behalf of - and financed by - the union.

(d). For several months the school supported two persons to work full time in the labor movement at Fort Smith, the industrial center of this area.

(e). The Commonwealth College Association, governing body of the school, was expanded to include nine leading union officials of this area.

(f). Under direction of the District Organizer the school played a leading part in organizing the Arkansas Conference for Economic and Social Justice, held in Little Rock July 23rd. Party members who took responsibility for setting up this Conference - the most important step to date in building the Democratic Front in Arkansas - were trained at Commonwealth, used it as their headquarters, and received financial assistance from the school.

4. In Commonwealth College the Party has a unique institution of national value and importance. Commonwealth owns the best and best-maintained labor library in the country, and a 320 acre tract in a location enabling it to serve both industrial and agricultural workers. The national facilities of the plant are used to foster democratic responsibility for maintenance and keep operating costs at a minimum. Students develop labor discipline in their work in farm, industry, kitchen etc.

5. The school has been operating under ceaseless financial stress. The ever broadening scope of the work presents more and more opportunities which could be seized and followed up if money were available. The work is entirely dependent on voluntary donations.

6. A situation has now arisen which offers us an extraordinary opportunity to move into the most important organization in the agricultural South: the STFU. H. L. Mitchell, secretary of the STFU, who has been consistently opposed to the International with which that

union is affiliated, to the Party, and to Commonwealth, is on a leave of absence from his office. The President of the Union (J. R. Butler) and other members of the Executive Council who are friendly to us have invited us to conduct an intensive program of mass meetings throughout Arkansas and Missouri, beginning August 21st. At these meetings Claude Williams would be the principal speaker and a play which our school has in readiness for the purpose of dramatizing the union's needs could be presented. If this program could be carried out we believe it would place us in a position to capture the union for our line at the next convention. This is an opportunity for establishing a real party base in the STFU.

7. The situation is that we cannot undertake this program in the STFU without immediate financial assistance. We would not make an appeal to the Party if we were not assured of the paramount importance and urgency of carrying out such a program. As the Center knows, Claude Williams has traveled from east to west coasts soliciting contributions to Commonwealth. Last year he went to the Center for the first time and asked only for an entree to the Hollywood group, which was given, and of which he was most appreciative. It was estimated at the Center that he could raise $3,000 in Hollywood but the net amount collected on the whole Pacific coast was $1,300. The reason for this is simply that most Hollywood progressives who are sympathetic to Commonwealth's present program are Party members and are committed to give all they can spare direct to the Party.

8. Commonwealth is possibly the Party's most strategic position from which to work at this time in the South, where the danger of Fascism is greatest. We do not pretend that it is the only important phase but it is a very important one. We believe the problem of our Party work in the South needs to be approached on a broad basis, that the importance of our Southern work should be carefully appraised and that a sum of money from the National funds should be allocated to it, so that not only Commonwealth but all other Party activities in the South may be assured of a definite income. We recommend to this end the calling of a Southwide conference of Party workers in the field. We are convinced that as a result of such a conference the Center would allocate funds for the South where they are so sorely needed.

At the present time, however, we wish to draw special attention to the immediate problem of financing the STFU program above described, which cannot be undertaken unless funds can be raised before the end of next week. The program could be undertaken for $500 and we ask the Center to give most careful study to our request for that sum. Another like opportunity is hardly likely to occur.

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